ENTER THE RUIN: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE CULTURE OF ABANDONED PLACES AND THE RISING FASCINATION WITH MODERN RUIN

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ABSTRACT

Enter the Ruin: A Journey Through the Culture of Abandoned Places

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Master of Letters Thesis by

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This is a study of the current culture which surrounds modern ruin, often expressed as Ruin Lust, and how it relates to an interdisciplinary contemplation of modernist works of literature, film, photography, and video games that utilize ruin as a theme. This study proposes theories on the rise in fascination with ruins through a scientific analysis of the cognitive interest in subjects of ruin, decay, or abandonment. These theories are referred to collectively as Ruin Lust Attractors. To study this psychological interest, the Attractors are applied to slow ruins in the United States. Modern Urban Explorers consider ruins of historic note and mundane abandoned buildings to be worthwhile. Therefore, all types of modern ruin are examined in this study.

This study introduces the terms of "ruin" and "abandonment" as they apply to structures discussed in this study as well as the term Urban Exploration (Urbex) which is used to denote the current practice of ruin tourism. The subjects of this study are mostly Urbexers, but all types of ruin explorers and ruin voyeurism, is considered.

Common Curiosity, Historical Interest, Imagination and Nostalgia for the Past, Architecture, Artistic Aesthetics, Return to Nature, and Contemplation of Self are

suggested as the foundational Ruin Lust Attractors. These Attractors are explored as common reasons for interest in modern ruin.

The more obscure Ruin Lust Attractors are ones that are more deeply rooted in human psychology or biology. These are: the Science of Fear, the Tragedy Paradox and Morbid Curiosity, and interest in the Paranormal.

The ten theoretical Ruin Lust Attractors are comprehensively applied to case studies of modern ruin preservation in an attempt to propose better methods of preservation for ruins. The case studies include Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, PA and Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital once located in Parsippany, NJ. This thesis proposes that the same Attractors which generate interest in a ruin when it is abandoned can be used to create a successful and sustainable model for its future preservation.

DEDICATION

For the ruin hunter in all of us.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FIGURE LIST

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EPIGRAPH

Enter This Deserted House

Figure 1: Hope In Crocuses

But please walk softly as you do.
Frogs dwell here and crickets too.

Ain't no ceiling, only blue
Jays dwell here and sunbeams too.

Floors are flowers—take a few.
Ferns grow here and daisies too.

Whoosh, swoosh—to-whit, too-woo,
Bats dwell here and hoot owls too.

Ha-ha-ha, hee-hee, hoo-hoooo,
Gnomes dwell here and goblins too.

And my child, I thought you knew
I dwell here…and so do you.

—Shell Silverstein, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*

CHAPTER ONE: Entering the Ruin

It's a place
for those who own no place
to correspond to ruins in the soul.
It's mine.
It's all yours.
—Li-Young Lee, *With Ruin*

I walked right through the back door of the abandoned house. The warm winter day was still, and only a few birds sung in withdrawn trees, singing of the distant thought of spring. Years of fallen leaves and discarded debris framed the house. Wind whistled through windows left open wide. The door had been ajar when I had approached the house from behind, and I had needed only to reach for it and pull. The hinges holding it to the frame had scattered small shrieks into the air and echoed in the empty house. The rooms were lit with only the natural sunlight which flowed through opaque windows scattered by the waving leaves of trees. Despite careful steps, my boots announced my entrance loudly on the wooden floor. I felt the weight of my intrusion and the compulsion to call out: "Hello?"

No one had answered. Obviously. The house had been uninhabited for years. Nothing remains of life there except for what life had left behind: a discarded knife on the kitchen counter, the skull of an animal in the living room, broken glass from fallen ceiling lights, and a china cabinet upended and left in disarray. Except, then I realized as I stood in the empty house, that life *was* moving back into the house as nature pushed its way in through the cracks divided by time. Imprints of animals that had walked through the house left their scattered mark, the paint had cracked, the windows broken, boards soaked with rainwater had begun to rot. The house had begun its slow process of

returning to the Earth. Eventually, it will cease to exist.

I had a vision there of all the time that had come before that time: the Lenni-Lenape passing through the sturdy woods; canal workers, shrugging off the stiffness of work, wiping sweat from their brows as they rest their backs on a pillar of stone; then the house, first a frame, then a home, then with a family; then an empty house, with me standing inside. One day the house will be gone, and so will I.

What family had lived in the house I walked through that day, and why did they leave? It is a puzzle to which having no explicit answer suits the question. The response, instead, is in the creative experience of interacting with the ruin. It is in imagining the life which once existed and becoming a voyeur to the life which presently persists in its place. It was not my first abandoned house. By far that house was less precarious than the last, which was overburdened with graffiti suggesting the Satanic and an attic which had to be accessed by climbing on the half wall at the top of the stairs. Yet, both called to me in the same way. Their emptiness was somehow intriguing.

Figure 2: What Life Left Behind

I do not recall my call to ruin. That is to say, I am unsure when ruins entered my periphery and casually became my focus. There was no first ruin, no last. Except that the hauntedness of abandonment has followed me throughout my life intertwining in exquisite ways. I found ruin as the root of every story I loved, and in turn, it had wound its way into my own writing. Eventually, I found it in my adventures, realizing the road

map of any journey was marked by abandoned places. What kind of adventure is a ruin? Essentially, "the ruin is an adventure. We venture our experience upon the possibility of unity among fractured matter and fragmented form," Robert Ginsberg stated in his study on the aesthetics of ruin (9). A ruin is something that is perfect in its imperfection, intriguing in that it has no end and no beginning. In entering the ruin, we become a part of it: its story and its very framework.

In my late twenties, I had discovered myself to be deeply obsessed with ruin, and it made me want to understand why. I soon found I was not alone. The culture surrounding abandoned buildings is not new. People of various backgrounds and interests have been intrigued by ruin for centuries. The twenty-first century alone has seen a rise in a new breed of interest in the culture of abandoned places, one that pays tribute to a history of art and aesthetics, and a mindfulness for preservation. But it also has generated a divergent culture with a scope that has widened, finding beauty in both architectural wonders as well as simple derelict structures. Why do humans find beauty in brokenness, and what does it say about humanity that we devote time to gazing on buildings that have otherwise been condemned? To begin, we must first understand what psychologically draws us to these places, why scientifically we are attracted to something we logically should not be. Not everyone's brain is wired to regard ruins with an interested eye, an artist's gaze, or an explorer's fervor, so what does it say about the people who do? And where do we find ruins in the twenty-first century?

Actually, they are everywhere. The United States has many ruins and abandoned places can be found beyond the physical world. Our cultural obsession with ruins is so deeply ingrained within us that ruin and abandonment find their way into our popular

culture. Ruins are in the books that we read, the movies we revere, and the video games we play. We can follow the journeys of urban explorers via social media and buy photography collections of ruin. Ruin saturates our living lives and it ingrains itself into our subconscious. We are all, perhaps, a little obsessed with ruin without even realizing it. We all experience ruin in different ways, relate to it from different backgrounds, and contemplate its meaning through our unique relationship with abandonment.

What can be extracted from a study of a cultural interest in ruin is a psychological profile of the urban explorer, and an answer to the who and why of the conundrum behind a rising fascination with modern ruin. In this study, I will explore possible cultural and psychological explanations for what draws the gaze of the twenty-first century to decay and suggest possible theories about how it affects us as individuals and what it means about us as human beings. These theories will be developed through the examination of existing physical ruins I have traveled to, as well as the appearance of ruin and abandonment in popular culture. These possible factors for ruin attraction I will refer to collectively as the Ruin Lust Attractors.

While Urban Exploration (Urbex) may seem like a cultural phenomenon of the last decade, people have been visiting abandoned structures for many different reasons for quite some time. The resurrection of curiosity in these topics speaks about people culturally, their curiosities, and their fears. Abandonment and ruin have always been wide-ranging and far reaching topics, and the study of this subject is often older than many of the ruins studied today. It is therefore important, when discussing these subjects, to define the parameters and scope through which they will be discussed in this study.

For the purpose of this study, a structure being referred to as "abandoned" or as a "ruin" is a building which is no longer serving any purpose, either related to or non-related to its original construction, it is not being inhabited, and it has essentially been left for an extended period of time to decline structurally. Though the terms "ruin" and "abandoned" will be often used synonymously, a structure with specific characteristics outside of the general definition will be noted. There are many different types of modern ruins, and to study them all would be beyond the parameters of this research. Therefore, the scope of this project will be limited to what are considered "slow ruins," or ruins that have declined over a period of years. This is the opposite of "fast ruins" which include buildings destroyed quickly, for example, buildings destroyed by war. These two terms were introduced by Gavin Lucas in a 2013 article in the *Oxford Handbook of the Archeology of the Contemporary Past* and fit this study nicely.

The differences in cultural regard for aging and abandoned structures is outside of the scope of this project, and therefore this study will only discuss ruins in the United States and attempt to understand why Americans specifically have a regard for modern ruins. Significant time will be given to ruins of historical importance, but truly, modern ruin exploration includes any kind of ruin. A ruin's history can either become more important with its decline or less important. Sometimes, the real history becomes lost with time, and the abandoned building has only the story it can tell through its life as a ruin. Sometimes, that is the story people are most interested in. With that in mind, this study will give attention to various structures using an array of examples of American slow ruins to illustrate the scientific concepts explored throughout.

The use of such a study as this need not have an end result other than intellectual

interests, but it would not be reaching its full potential if such work were not done with a purpose. Each day, we lose more of the structures which mankind has abandoned. One day, they could all cease to exist entirely. For some buildings, this is part of their natural cycle in the world. For others, this means we are losing part of our history each time a building is left to rot or is demolished. Once the foundation of the culture surrounding abandoned places has been established within this study, I will apply what has been discovered to examine the preservation of Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, PA, and the unsuccessful attempt to save Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital in Parsippany, NJ. In applying the Ruin Lust Attractors to these conservation efforts, I hope to create a better model for future historical preservation.

CHAPTER TWO: The Basics of Ruin Lust

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.
–T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Why enter the ruin? "No one has any business in a ruin" except for "the didactic task of learning about what is not there" (Ginsberg 44). The ruin reminds us of ourselves. It represents that time is fleeting, and so too is life. But, perhaps there is more to it than that. Why are we drawn deeply to abandoned places? Or, for those who refer to the visual appeal of the photographs of modern abandonment that circulate on the Internet as Ruin Porn, why are we turned on by the ruins of our time? Ruin is aesthetically pleasing, but why? It marks both the failings and fortune of time: the industry which permitted its construction and the economy which led to its fall. It scares us, and it fascinates us. It reminds us to be mindful of our past, and it teaches us a lesson about our future.

Everyone views a ruin differently since we bring our own knowledge and background to our experience of it. In his own journey through ruin, Christopher Woodward acknowledged that:

> To a statesman, ruins predict the fall of Empires, and to philosophers the futility of mortal man's aspirations. To a poet, the decay of a monument represents the dissolution of the individual ego in the flow of Time; to a painter or architect, the fragments of a stupendous antiquity call into question the purpose of their art (2).

Everyone is touched by ruin. Abandonment is a theme in life no one can escape; nothing lasts forever. The ways in which we are touched by abandonment vary; therefore, our individual approach to ruin will be different. This chapter is an excavation of the more

finite theories about the attraction to modern decay. These common Ruin Lust Attractors are the foundation of many individuals' reasoning for being interested in modern ruin.

Simple Curiosity

Interest in ruin begins with a sense of awe and a "desire to know," (Ginsberg 321). What is it that we want to know about an abandoned building? Regarding ruin is a study in what no longer exists; it is an exercise in exploring what used to be and what was left behind. It was simple curiosity that made me wonder about the keyboard I found in the loft of an old house in the Delaware Water Gap (see Fig. 3). Simple curiosity is the first attraction to the modern ruin.

Psychologically, the human mind is programmed to notice things out of the ordinary. When facing something unwholesome such as a ruin, the human psyche is forced to comprehend something incomplete and to experience something entirely new making a ruin a novel experience. A professor who studies the relationships between literature and psychology, Eric G. Wilson, stated in his novel, "we are more alive when we face what we can't quite understand—on edge and required to think beyond our habits" (172). The interaction we have with a ruin also depends on the nature of the ruin. We will experience differently the ruin of a prison than we would an ordinary home. Ginsberg studies both the mundane and exceptional in ruin aesthetics stating in his work that even the simple ruined structure of a home "strikes many chords

Figure 3: Off Key In Abandonment

in our sensibility, since we are familiar with the functions and furnishings" (Ginsberg 370). While a prison reminds us of the institution, and makes us question what we do not innately know the ruin of a home presents us with curiosity about what we do know.

In her book, prominent sociologist, Margee Kerr, explains that as humans age, "we tend to see and experience fewer new or novel events" (*Scream* 128). As we age, we are more likely to have encountered ruins, which suggests why Urbexing is relegated to a younger crowd, mainly social groups young enough to still find ruin exploring to be a new experience and old enough to have the mobility of traveling to the ruins. This suggests that groups ages 16 to 30 are most common for Urbexing. While this theory of age requires further study it, would also explain why Ruin Porn has found such a wide-spread market on social media platforms, which are mainly navigated by specific age groups. Although the actual exploration of such ruins may be more prevalent in younger age groups, the actual viewing of these ruins can be enjoyed by anyone.

Our innate curiosity can be stimulated by any novel/new experience. Social media platforms allow for the viewer to experience novel ruins every day because the online, virtual platforms connect people to ruins they might not ever see or interact with. As the authors and photographers of ruin exploration Rusty Tagliareni and Christina Mathews state in their collection *Antiquity Echoes,* "we very quickly learned that the spectrum of people who had an interest in abandoned places was far and wide" (XI). Ruin is an excellent mediator, helping all age groups and people find common ground in places that are losing ground. For the young, the ruin may call them to enter, and more mature viewers may be more likely to simply enjoy the view. Either way, this tenacious

curiosity about ruins often leads to a desire to find out more about the ruin, which directs our attention to its past.

Historical Interest

Part of the contemplation of a ruin is an interest in the historical past of the ruin. To the casual observer, an abandoned building is only the shell of what had once been, but to the historian these structures are fulfilling the obligation to a remembered history by their continued existence, even if in the form of a ruin. To say that there is no life left in an abandoned building would be inaccurate; a building holds on to the memories of the past, "and if you're paying attention, it plays them back to you in the only way it can—in an orchestration of light and shadow" (Tagliareni and Mathews, *Antiquity* 78). The ruin is a reminder of the past; it is a place holder for what had once been important enough to a society to take the time to design and construct.

The reminder of a building's past is also an invitation to reflect on the present. Woodward reflected that there is a "strange sense of displacement which occurs when we find that, living, we cannot fill the footprints of the dead" (5). This is likely to happen when one confronts buildings of particular historic significance. Specifically, the abandonment of buildings which were once considered innovative and important constructions of their time speaks to the changes in society through the years, whether these changes are from a switch in theology or a fluctuation in economic and societal needs. Historical interest in ruins is one of the most powerful motivators for

preservation. As author/photographer and preservationist, Rusty Tagliareni stated in an interview there is "value of retaining these neglected pieces of history so that future generations may better understand who came before them" (18 Nov. 2018). The desire to *know* what has come before is intrinsically intertwined with the desire to *understand*. I found a connection to this idea when I visited Bannerman Castle on Pollepel Island on the Hudson River in New York. It is the former site of a military surplus arsenal built to resemble a Scottish Castle (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4: Approach To Bannerman Castle

The ruin has its own separate story, and it is also a part of a larger historical narrative. Ruins are a connection between the past and the present. The abandoned building allows us insight into life as it was in the past if only by showing what was important to the people of that time and what they were willing to leave behind. Ruins can teach us a lesson. The past gives us a warning about the future, which is a story many historians of modern ruin try to tell.

Imagination and Nostalgia for the Past

The actual history of a ruin is not always easily accessed, leaving the truth about a building's history up to the imagination of the viewer: "a ruin is a dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator" (Woodward 139). When we encounter the ruin, we are invited to participate in a narrative that is inevitably incomplete. Sometimes the history of a ruin can be researched and identified as being

unfounded, other times the real history of the building has been lost leaving only what remains of a viewer's perception of the building. We are drawn to the ruin by the unknown and by our own nostalgia for the past. "Ruins do not speak; we speak for them" (Woodward 203). We create the narrative of the ruin and infuse it with our own knowledge of the past and how we personally relate to the structure. When we find the ruins of the past, we create a narrative of the debris trying to understand why we find what we find in what has been left behind (see Fig. 5).

Time adds another layer to the modern ruin's story; the longer the building is removed from remembered history, it is more likely to find a place in urban legend.

Figure 5: Shoes

Since "the past can be a more vivid presence than the future" it is not difficult to make the leap from historical fact to the persistence of legend (Woodward 246). The group Weird NJ has made it their mission to investigate such legends, reporting on the various stories which circulate about modern ruins. Weird NJ writers Mark Sceurman and Mark Moran began publishing stories on the oddities of New Jersey in 1989 and have since branched out to include the entire United States. The group markets their stories as a "travel guide and magazine to places you won't find on state funded maps or located on any tourist attraction pamphlets" (*Weird NJ*). The Weird NJ

Figure 6: The Gingerbread Castle

crew specializes in the taboo and in venturing to places we are not meant to go by creating a road map of sites that have become important sometimes simply through the active imagination and nostalgia of the people living with these ruins.

Nostalgia for the past plays a direct role in the interest of an abandoned structure when the site relates to a person's childhood or memory of a site when it was open. This is often related to sites such as closed amusement parks (see Fig. 6 on previous page) or buildings that were part of the landscape of our past, such as the diner in Sussex County which had been open during my friend's childhood but has been closed for the last few decades. After the door was locked, everything inside was left exactly as it had been the day the diner closed twenty years before (see Fig. 7).

Figure 7: Diner Frozen In Time

In popular culture, the ruins of our fictional worlds can become a focus of nostalgic interaction. This is seen especially when well known film franchises from our past are continued. For example, the ruins of the Galactic Empire, virtually the ruins of original Star Wars [1] episodes four through six, appear in the recent installments of episodes seven through nine. Some of these ruins are wrecked Imperial Star Cruisers or even, in episode nine, the shell of the Death Star crash landed in the ocean of a planet. Then there are the ruins of the original Jurassic Park in Jurassic World [2] and even the

[1] For further information see George Lucas' Star Wars episodes *A New Hope* (1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), and *Return of the Jedi* (1983) along with the recent films *The Force Awakens* (2015), *The Last Jedi* (2017), and *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019) continued from Lucas' franchise.

[2] Compare original 1993 *Jurassic Park* film directed by Steven Spielberg to 2015 film *Jurassic World* directed by Colin Trevorrow.

abandoned Jumanji [3] board game is unearthed and transformed into a video game in the recent films. In creating the world of these films, we have created the ruins of that world, and despite the fact that the world does not actually exist, we have a sense of nostalgia for the reminder of past pleasure immersed in a fictional world

There are many other facets of ruin lust under the umbrella of historic interests, but the most important is one which is the hallmark motivator behind many preservation efforts: architecture.

Architecture

Architectural design has changed significantly over the past centuries including a variation in the overall layout, building material, and architectural flourishes used to accent a structure. There is something truly fascinating about the method of construction used by our predecessors, and it is the uniqueness of these designs which many people find intriguing about ruin. Architecture that fell out of style presents a novel visual experience today. This can be seen in the dramatic style of medieval architecture of Eastern State Penitentiary's façade or the more subtle and beautiful design of the Arts and Crafts movement in the style of Outlook Lodge in Wantage, NJ (see Fig. 8).

Figure 8: The Hunting Lodge

[3] For more information view 1995 film *Jumanji* directed by Joe Johnston in relation with the 2017 film *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* directed by Jake Kasdan.

Even Adolf Hitler was intrigued by the ruins of the past. After viewing the Roman Colosseum in Italy, Hitler ordered that only "marble, stone, and brick" be used in the construction of Nazi architecture because these building materials "would ensure that at the fall of the 1,000 year Reich they would resemble their Roman models" (Woodward 29). So intrigued was Hitler by the ruins of the past that he was constructing the buildings of his empire with ruin in mind. The value of the architectural design of ruins is both real and sometimes alarming. Woodward heads off this historical truth with the question of whether Hitler's obsession with the architecture of ruin should deter from our own enjoyment, to which Woodward responds: "to Hitler the Colosseum was not a ruin but a monument…Poets and painters like ruins, and dictators like monuments" (30). This leads to the next common explanation for interest in modern ruins and that is the experience of ruins as part of artistic aesthetics.

Artistic Aesthetics

The ruin offers a unique opportunity for the artist, not only because it allows the artist to imagine the missing parts of what once was, but because the uneven lines and jagged edges allow for a journey into beauty that is far more subjective and even abstract. Ruin has long been an inspiration for the artist and continues to offer a unique opportunity to capture the process of decay as something beautiful. The very incompleteness of Ruin gives the artist unusual vantage points to frame a shot and capture a moment of a ruin's being, preserving it forever in that particular

Figure 9: Sunlight In The Mausoleum

moment of decline. For example, the broken glass of a mausoleum window in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in New York offers a view of the quiet beauty within (see Fig. 9 on previous page). Ruin as part of artistic aesthetic became so popular in the sixteenth century that those who did not have estates with actual relics of antiquity began to erect artificial ruins, known as follies, as artistic accents to gardens. This practice still happens to a certain extent today and arguably, modern ruins find their way still in our artistic practices: photography collections such as *Atlas Obscura*[4], *Antiquity Echoes*, and the volumes of *Weird NJ*.

Return to Nature

To enter the ruin is to be temporarily removed from the present as the ruin offers a refuge from the surrounding world. The ruin creates a feeling of "seductive stillness" (Woodward 37) and "a unique kind of tranquility" (Tagliareni and Mathews, *Antiquity* VIII). In its absence of purpose, the ruin allows for an escape from the constraints and obligations of the present. Hanging out in abandoned buildings isn't exactly a new concept, just kick around some of the debris at these places and see how old the trash is. The marks we make on ruin either by graffiti, carvings, damage to the structure, and what we in turn leave behind are an attempt to claim the ruin and essentially impart some of ourselves into its walls.

As decay is allowed to take its natural course, it results in the slow return of the ruin to nature. As Nature returns its' grip onto the building, the ruin becomes "a work of Nature" and ceases being only a product of man (Woodward 67). This intrusion of nature

[4] For further information see atlasobscura.com or reference the 2016 book *Atlas Obscura* by Dylan Thuras, Ella Morton, and Joshua Foer.

on the ruin is not actually an intrusion at all but is more of a reclaiming of the land by Nature. Authors Tagliareni and Mathews note that "there's something very poignant—and also quite mysterious—about this process" (*Antiquity* VIII). The mystery of a structure's unbecoming and return to dirt is a fascinating study for the modern urban explorer. The struggle of survival in such a casual and calming setting offers a release from the fear of destruction. I saw this at an abandoned farmstead in an overgrown field of the Delaware Water Gap where the many deteriorating structures had succumbed to rot and had signs of nature beginning to grown inside: vines twisted into open doors, tree branches were visible through holes in attic roofs, and the obsolete items left behind were overgrown with high grasses (see Fig. 10). Decay can be beautiful and destruction peaceful. This concept of beauty and decay reminds us of ourselves.

Figure 10: Play That Record One More Time

Contemplation of Self

"When we contemplate ruins, we contemplate our own future," (Woodward 2). In ruin we witness our own fate because we are reminded that everything comes to an end. The act of ruin gazing becomes self-reflexive. The realization of the impermanence of a structure permeates through the human psyche reminding us of our own frailty. A ruin calls into question the path our lives take and remind us of what will eventually

become obsolete. A disused train trestle in Pennsylvania reminded me of this (see Fig. 11).

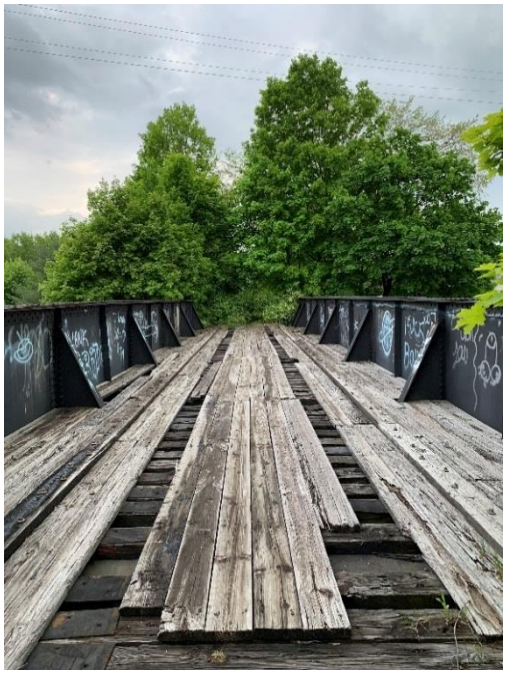

Figure 11: End Of The Line

The ruin is a skeleton of what once was, and it becomes a framework for the contemplation of how life and death exist in harmony at the same time. The contemplation of death and our visceral connection to it begins to inform on a more obscure understanding of the culture surrounding abandoned buildings. It speaks to our fears, our curiosity about death, and our contemplation on the future world beyond death. In a way, the end (death) marks the beginning of our deeper study into the scientific understanding of the psychological attraction to modern ruin.

CHAPTER THREE: The Science of Fear and the Ruins that Scare Us

Many are harmed by fear itself, and many may have
come to their fate by dreading fate.
—Seneca, *Oedipus*

The science of fear. It sounds scary. But the study of fear actually assists in understanding human reaction to various situations and therefore gains insight into the cognitive processes which help to keep us alive. Charles Darwin's concept of Natural Selection or survival of the fittest is reflective of this ability to successfully traverse threat situations. If humans respond to fear situations correctly, they live to see another day. The need for rapid detection of threat sometimes creates illogical fear reactions. The body's automated fear response makes us feel the chemical reaction of fear before we may even understand what, exactly, we are afraid of. A ruin could unnerve us without us even understanding why.

The human brain functions in two different modes. The first mode is a focus on long-term survival such as finding shelter and food. The second is the sympathetic mode, which focuses on short-term survival. The latter is the mode in which a person would be functioning if faced with a real life fear situation. In his article about the biology of fear Arne Öhman stated that the second mode processes "autonomic responses" which include the "flight, fight, freezing" reactions in humans (Öhman 43). These reactions of the sympathetic nervous system are based on the brain performing "a very quick, crude assessment for threat potential, which is continually updated by incoming information" (Öhman 43). The reactions of the sympathetic nervous system come from information previously acquired about what we should be afraid of.

To understand how we cognitively recognize and physically react to threat brings us closer to understanding what frightens us. Since "learning is an important mechanism for selection for what people fear" humans are not necessarily born with automatic fear responses to certain things (Öhman 45). Learning to fear certain aspects of the world we live in trains our brains to stay away from danger or to flee when danger arrives. The sight of an ominous ruin could evoke a fear reaction from the brain's threat responses because we recognize something in the ruin that frightens us. Immediately, although logic tells us that a building cannot harm us, we see the darkness and the decay, the isolation and emptiness, and it reminds us of what haunts us. This is the beautiful and flawed nature of threat reaction. As Daniel Gardner explained in his novel about fear science, the threat reaction allows us "to assess a situation and render judgment in an instant" but the same quick responses "can generate irrational conclusions" (16). To fear an abandoned building, therefore, would mean a person has acquired the fear of an attribute of an abandoned structure, such as darkness or emptiness, and possibly even abandonment. Part of entering the ruin is getting past the initial feeling of dread. After entering an abandoned train tunnel in Byram, NJ I was impressed by the darkness at the heart of the space and thankful for the light at the end (see Fig. 12).

Figure 12: Ice Cave On The Cut-Off

Any building which is left untended will decline structurally. The natural world is always at odds with the manufactured one, trying endlessly to reclaim lost ground; wood rots, windows crack, pipes rust. This is part of the natural cycle of an abandoned building. There are also the unnatural elements which are at work against the building: rocks are thrown at windows by a passerby, local youths force open doors and spray graffiti along the walls, scavengers strip the house of copper pipes for resale. Any and all of these types of neglect and mistreatment of the building cause it to become not just abandoned, but aid in the process of decay and decline. With these forces at work against it, the modern ruin, over time, begins to look scary. Any of these attributes of a building could aid in the persistence of a fear reflex when being presented with an abandoned house. Then, there is the persistence in idea that a building itself can be bad.

If we go with our gut feeling at the first sight of a structure, we might feel like Eleanor Vance did when she first sets eyes on Hill House in Shirley Jackson's enduring work *The Haunting of Hill House.* On the approach to the house up the drive, Eleanor immediately thinks: "Hill House is vile, it is diseased; get away from here at once" (Jackson 23). There are different reasons for why a building is expressed as being "born bad" (Jackson 50). Despite accounts of "the houses described in Leviticus as 'leprous," tsarass, or Homer's phrase for the underworld: *adido domos*, the house of Hades" there is no scientific evidence to support that any inanimate object can be harmful in and of itself (Jackson 50).

Richard Wiseman, a professor of parapsychology stated in his book that "as far as we know, there is no way that information about events can be stored in the fabric of a building" (211). Nonetheless, the story of what has happened in a building before its life

as a ruin, whether true of part of a culture of urban myth surrounding the structure, is still a strong motive for people considering a building to be frightening. The feeling of foreboding associated with a structure is not logical, but threat responses are not always logical. Despite knowing nothing about the house, Eleanor's threat response instructs her that it is evil. In the case of this novel, she turns out to be correct, but that's a conversation best left for the supernatural.

After our initial glance at an abandoned building what else about it could evoke a fear response? Could the rigid and broken pieces of an abandoned building create symbolic geometric shapes which the human brain is wired to fear, such as an upside-down triangle? Based on a study done by Christine Larson, a psychologist who has been studying the correlations between threat response and geometric shapes, the upside down triangle or 'V' shape is identified by the brain as a more threatening shape. The 'V' shape, often associated with eyebrows, "convey an angry subjective state," and the shape itself "elicit this emotional meaning even when presented without any other facial feature" (Larson et al. 2). The upside down triangle or 'V' shape is often represented by sharp teeth, a sight which is a sign of danger for prey (Kerr, *Scream* 44). A ruin doesn't need to have teeth. If we look closely, these geometric shapes do appear: the glass of broken windows or the sharp points of shattered boards. I found these broken shapes in the caved-in structure of

Figure 13: Empty Horse Stalls

an old horse barn (see Fig. 13 on previous page) and the broken windows of an abandoned house (see Fig. 14). To further substantiate this theory about recognizing threat in geometric shapes, the shapes do not need to be triangles. "Abstract shapes and everyday objects (e.g., watch, sofa) containing sharp angles of various orientations have also been found to be less preferred than the similar shapes or objects containing curved forms" (Larson et al. 2). A ruin is broken; it is a collection of shards. Abandoned buildings warp and begin to collapse, their shape becomes abstracted further and further from the original as they decay. When viewing the abstract of a building, we are causing neural reactions in the amygdala, a part of the brain which is responsible for both emotions and the survival instinct. The abandoned building exhibits geometric characteristics that humans can find innately unnerving. Since the brain also logically knows that the building cannot hurt us, we don't have to run away.

Figure 14: Shards Of Glass And Broken Windows

Shapes initiating specific responses also relates to the human ability to interpret facial expressions. In human facial recognition, we look for expressions that create shapes on the face which represent specific emotions. Studies to understand the psychology of human ability to interpret facial cues has evolved over the years but while physiological responses vary from person to person there are still general shapes which can be interpreted as emotive. The interpretation of the upside down triangle associated with eyebrows is part of this ability. If the shape of certain facial expressions can evoke a feeling of being threatened, what does this mean when the brain perceives a house as a

face? The door can be representative of a mouth, windows are eyes and other accents materialize as part of the building's expression. It seems a bit far-fetched at first but let's reference one of the greatest horror writers of the last century, Jackson and her isolated haunted house in the hills. Throughout the narrative, Jackson consistently references the houses' anthropomorphic qualities. The characters within the walls of the house often feel as if they are being watched and begin to reference the houses' ability to know or think. The narrator states:

> No Human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house, and yet somehow a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle, some chance meeting of roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair, more frightening because the face of Hill House seemed awake, with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of the cornice (Jackson 24).

There is no better argument for the terrific face-like expressions of houses than the words of Shirley Jackson, but I reached out to prominent sociologist Margee Kerr, who studies fear, and asked what she thought about the human neural networks' ability to find the patterns and shapes in the face of a house. "We do have that propensity to try and find faces and familiarity in the unusual," Kerr said, and "these ruins have such interesting shapes that are abnormal and novel" which generate curiosity in an individual (Kerr, personal interview). The novelty found in the shape of ruin is enough to create a response. Humans are "always looking to make things more predictable and fit the world into their own schema," stated psychologist, Jennifer Battles in an interview. This ability, she explains, is related to top-down processing or a person's ability to assess and interpret new situations, such as ruins, based on the knowledge they already have of the world. We can see the face of a building as an actual expressive face because of our imagination and desire to create logic order from stimuli received by our senses.

The eyes of houses, their windows, can lend to the feeling of being watched. The empty windows of a building after all suggest anyone could be watching from within. The closed door hints at what could be hidden inside. We can gaze at an abandoned building but we might always feel like it is watching us in turn. The feeling of being observed does not have to be initiated by windows since other stimuli, such as the graffiti found on the abandoned road of an old quarry, can create this feeling as well (see Fig. 15). The desire to go where we aren't meant to go comes from the idea of counter control which creates the desire to go or be where we were distinctly told not to go (Battles). But the feeling of being watched reminds us that we shouldn't necessarily be there in the first place.

Once we have arrived at an abandoned building and allowed our senses to reckon with our fight or flight response, there is the fear of getting caught to reckon with. Many abandoned buildings are situated on private land and going to and entering these ruins can have definitive legal consequences. For some people this might be part of the fun. This study is not intended to be a treatise for trespassing; it merely attempts to suggest a correlation between a thrill-seekers' desire for more hands-on fun fear experiences and the rise in urban exploration. I felt, after thinking about the "eyes" of abandoned buildings curating the fear of getting caught, the only way to check this hypothesis was to go out and test it.

Figure 15: Eyes On The Road

I went to the former Playboy Club in Vernon, NJ without permission. A friend and I drove right up to the front door, realizing we might be going where we weren't meant to be, and we became mildly nervous when we saw the reflection of a truck, headlights on, parked around the corner of the building. Thinking we were about to get caught, we froze. Then we realized the "truck" was the distorted reflection in the glass of the revolving doors of our own vehicle. Tension gone, we laughed at our own jumpiness, and continued our journey around the building. The knowledge of trespassing added to the excitement and the numerous windows of the expansive former hotel created the feeling of always being watched. My friend had told me about the history of squatters in the derelict building, of the murder which had taken place there, and its recent use as Section 8 housing. The thought had crossed my mind that we might find someone living there.

When we hiked around the back of the building, crawling through overgrown brush and over a broken wooden fence to walk on the faded rear patio, I had a sense of vulnerability from the open ground. I felt like an animal might feel when crossing a clearing in the woods. My flight or fight instincts were subconsciously kicking, in and my sympathetic nervous system responses were getting the better of me. Who or what could be watching me from where I couldn't see as I walked over the faded seventies era, art deco, pool patio? (See Fig. 16). The pool, flooded with murky water,

Figure 16: The Playboy Club

was half frozen over and looked eerie, and a bird rustling in the leaves of the nearby woods sounded like footsteps in the stillness of the mountain air. But the fear of getting caught was not half as intimidating as the building itself, which loomed over us like a giant animal. Curtains hooded the many windows, and discarded bottles and cans littered the terraces where people came at night to drink. The sheer size of the building, empty, was impressive and it made me think of other things we nurture and then leave behind, of the things we once had a use for and can't seem to find a place for anymore. Abandonment sent a shiver up my spine and it made me wonder at what point do we lose hope? At what point are we abandoned? I was beginning to learn some of my first lessons in urban exploration: sometimes the most frightening thing about a ruin is what we discover there about ourselves. The whole ruin of the hotel felt so alien I could not shake the strange feeling that had crept into the back of my mind. I was surprised then when later my father informed me that, when I was young, I had been swimming in that very pool. I tried to place myself among the non-ruin but couldn't get passed the decay and the layer of ice.

The fear initiated by ruin so far has been related to the human's cognitive response to visual stimuli of the structure. Beyond the psychological fear of ruin, there is the actual physical threat of traversing an abandoned structure. These buildings have been condemned for a reason after all and choosing to enter one can put us in danger. An unstable structure is unsuitable for an adventure, but should someone choose to venture inside anyway, they are likely to feel the thrill at the potential for physical injury. The visual and physical fears may also enhance the fears that may be more deeply rooted in our consciousness, such as the fear of failure. If the ruin is a reflection of self, it can

force us to confront the fear of our own failure. In a desire to deflect a failure of self, we in turn hope to remake the ruin, even if in our imagination, in an attempt to undo what has been destroyed.

The ability to unmake a ruin would mean that our tangible failure is a fate that is reversible. No modern platform represents this ideal better than some of the most popular video games today while also giving players an opportunity to take physical risks in a virtual world. Of the aesthetics of ruin, *Kill Screen* video game writer, David Chandler, remarks in an article, "ruins provide an aesthetic setting that matches the core idea behind most games: to interact with a broken world and to change it through play." In these types of games the player is cast in the "role of 'restorer'" (Chandler). This role allows a player to successfully face their fears of destruction and ruin by allowing a chance to put the world right again. In virtually reversing the failures of the world in the game, players are able to combat their fear in the impermanence of the world we physically live in. Video games also offer a unique ability to take chances we would be loath to attempt in real life. Even if the character in the game dies, the player is not physically injured in real life. Navigating the ruins in a game illuminate the actual physical threat involved with traversing a real ruin.

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time is a game set in a ruin. The game is played within the Palace of Azad, which is slowly crumbling to the ground. The destruction of the palace was caused by the unnamed Prince who released the Sands of Time and turned everyone but himself and two others into evil sand creatures. He and the princess, Farah, must navigate the collapsing ruin to reverse the damage and defeat the evil Vizier. The ruin essentially becomes a symbol for his own failure, and each time it crumbles to block

his path or he is injured by it, he is reminded of the mistakes he has made. Playing the game, you are the Prince, and you are aided in your desperate quest through the ruin by visions and by manipulating the Sand itself with the Dagger of Time, which you can use to rewind time if you make a mistake. There are many mistakes to be made when the building you are traversing is filled with sand creatures wielding swords and the ground is crumbling beneath your feet.

Though this ruin may feel initially alien, the feelings evoked through the gameplay can feel familiar. The sense of abandonment the Prince feels when his misguided action of releasing the Sands of Time destroys every living thing, turning even his own father into a mindless sand creature, resonates with our own past experiences. The isolation and regret the Prince has to reckon with because of his failure and the destruction it caused enhances the feelings of fear and desperation that are created through the gameplay. The Prince navigates the eerie silence of the ruins alone, and when he must eventually fight and destroy the sand creature who had once been his father, it evokes within us feelings of isolation and regret we understand on a human, sometimes even personal, level.

Although the storyline sets it up so that the Prince will succeed, there are still reminders of the impermanence of success. As you journey through the palace and the story unfolds, your character enters a subterranean part of the palace to which the Prince remarks: “they said this palace was built on the ruins of an even more ancient one. I thought that was just a story.” Not only in the gameplay do you explore a ruin in progress but an older ruin, forgotten even to the Prince’s time. The ancient ruins represent the impermanence of man-made structures and is a subtle and eerie reminder that even if

the Prince succeeds, the Palace of Azad, and even he, will not last forever. The ruins of the Palace of Azad, the Prince remarks, become a sort of tomb as well as a memorial for his failure and inability to save the world from destruction. But the ruins aren't always a symbol for destruction, and they don't have to be a memorial for our failures.

The ruin does "in a way inspire a sense of hope that even in something that is broken down we can still try and see what it used to be and finding patterns in the pieces" (Kerr, personal interview). The Prince, and through him the player, is given a unique opportunity to recognize these patterns of opportunity in the ruin. There is a chance to make the world right again, to face the fear of the ruin and to come out of it unscathed. When I play *Prince of Persia,* I get to be the hero, and by the end of the game, I am able to turn back time to unmake the ruin I have spent the entire game traversing. In the game, I witness the ruin on its path to ruin, and I watch it become a non-ruin. I make it a ruin, and I save it from ruin. I've faced my fears without even leaving my living room. What is more satisfying than that?

The ruins that scare us are the ones that initiate our threat response from learned fears, or they are the broken ruins that tap into the innate sense of loathing we feel for abstract shapes which do not easily fit into patterns we can understand, or they are the places that threaten us physically when we choose to enter an unstable structure. The ruins that scare us are also the ones that remind us of anxieties more deeply rooted in our subconscious such as a fear of failure. These are the fear reactions which could make us want to run away from ruin—or not.

Fear is not always negatively expressed. On the contrary many urban explorers state an excitement over the "scare" quality of a building. The very creepiness of a

modern ruin, which can initially cause a fear response, is what some explorers are seeking. Although intelligent, logic-seeking beings, we sometimes do things that are illogical, and we don't always avoid the things we fear. These are the people who are considered thrill seekers or daredevils: the people academics would conscript with concepts such as "sensation seeking, novelty seeking, benign masochism, [and] hedonic reversals" (Kerr, *Scream* 5). These are the people who, despite their fears, are willing to face them, and are even able to enjoy the experience. These are perhaps some of the same people walking through the threshold of an abandoned building.

What is important about facing your fears? As long as the subject knows that the fear is not real and the danger orchestrated, they can obtain positive results that last beyond the experience. For example, watching scary movies or visiting a haunted house attraction instigate a safe fear because of the separation from the threat of conflict. Psychologists have noted in a study that "voluntary engagement with negative information has been shown to activate the same brain networks as engaging with positive information" (Kerr et al. 2). Fear releases the chemical Dopamine, and this chemical is responsible for providing humans the feeling of pleasure and accomplishment. Therefore, "adding explicit reward components to the experience, for example socializing with friends and choosing to confront fears in a 'fun-scary' space, could further increase proximal reward, such that subsequent reactions, including decreased reactivity, are later associated with reward" (Kerr et al. 2). Our bodies react in chemically similar ways to fear as we do to pleasure. When the parasympathetic mode of the brain is in charge during a positive fear situation, we are given a unique opportunity to experience reflexive fear. That is to say that we can learn something from

understanding what we are afraid of, and one of the earliest ways people did this was via a controlled fear situation such as listening to a ghost story.

The ghost story has long been a part of the repertoire of most cultures and very well may be one of the earliest forms of 'fun fear.' Sometimes these tales were told to share a lesson, teach a history, or offer a standard for which an individual should live. A ghost story could have any of these primary functions, but they were almost always used to entertain. The first ghost story was told long before its teller had any means to write it down, and many of these stories have outlived their first audience a hundred times over, reappearing throughout history with additions and contemporary twists. The love of the ghost story found a high point in the 18th century with the rise in Gothic literature. The literary Gothic tradition began with Horace Walpole's *Castle of Ontranto* in 1764. The concept of modern ruins being the location of the ghost story continued in literature throughout the years that followed: Edgar Allen Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher* in 1839 and Miss Havisham's house in Charles Dickens' 1861 novel *Great Expectations* being only two examples. Washington Irving is the author most credited with defining the ghost stories of the United States, importing stories he had collected from across Europe, re-setting them in the Hudson River Valley in New York and giving them an American flare. Irving's *The Legend of the Headless Horseman* is arguably America's best known ghost story, and it was modeled after the Germanic tale of a headless Hessian soldier. Irving had a mind for

Figure 17: Twenty-First Century Headless Horseman

making something of the pieces of something else, of assembling a ruin to make something new. His ghost stories still haunt the Hudson River Valley where the towns of Tarrytown and Sleepy Hollow are flooded with thrill seekers every Halloween season (see Fig. 17 on previous page).

The ghost story, however, was not always enough of a thrill. Humans found contemporary ways to enjoy the thrill of temporary fear as early as the fifteenth century, creating the first thrill rides which included the ice slide. Thrill rides remained a European domination until the United States began producing the electric trolley car, taking riders to the next level of physical thrills. The first haunted house attraction is thought to have been the Orton and Spooner Ghost House, constructed by Patrick Collins in 1915 England. In a world burdened by the horrors of the First World War and the fear that manipulated each day, Collins made a scare attraction that allowed carnival attendees to face a threat, and come out alive on the other side. This concept is a recurring theme in positive fear experiences. Part of the enjoyment is that it is not real but the satisfaction comes from the notion that one can accomplish facing a fear situation and reaching the other side unscathed.

The U.S. was quick to respond by pioneering their own haunted house attractions. In the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants imported the early concept of Halloween into the United States. Although Puritanical virtues at first rejected such a pagan practice, Halloween became extremely popular in North America, and the American version of it has since been exported back out to Europe. Halloween and its ritual focus on death and the afterlife is what opened the door for commercial haunted houses.

The rise of the modern haunted house in the United States started around the late 1960s with two notable events. The leadership training and civic organization, Jaycee, "began finding abandoned buildings and creating its own small haunted houses" to raise money for their organization (Kerr, *Scream* 196). With an abandoned house, half the decorating was already done, and so it was a natural move to utilize such a structure, already perceived as having scare qualities, as a haunt attraction. The second notable stride in the evolution of haunt history was when, in 1969, Disneyland opened its dark ride attraction the Haunted Mansion, introducing technological advances to the haunt mixture. Walt Disney creators had latched onto a successful thrill concoction: physical fear and psychological fear, eventually incorporating both with the opening of The Twilight Zone Tower of Terror attraction at MGM (now Hollywood Studios) in 1994. The Tower of Terror ride incorporated a fabricated haunted history and the thrill of the stomach drop ride. Both the Haunted Mansion and Tower of Terror have been the inspiration behind successful feature films, rocketing the haunted tales of each into the 21st century. The haunted house attraction has gone through a metamorphosis over the decades, but the general theme has remained the same and popularity in attending such attractions has only increased. The concept of fun fear has distinctly taken root in American consciousness.

Fun fear goes back a long way, and it is arguably our distance from actual threats in the United States which allow many people to be interested in the next level of thrill. This distance from actual threat in the United States makes the curious American interested in the unknown making us desire faster roller coasters, scarier horror movies, and going to more extreme haunted house attractions. The further we are removed from

actual fear, the more we may be likely to participate in a fabricated fear situation. But what does a haunted house attraction have to do with modern ruin? An abandoned building represents in reality what a haunted house can only mimic. The haunted house attraction is a way of mirroring, in a controlled situation, a chance for the human brain to enjoy fear while experiencing it in the parasympathetic mode. Going to an abandoned building, entering or just viewing it, can result in a positive fear reaction. In electing to go to an abandoned building, even if it looks frightening, one might experience resulting feelings of accomplishment, as if they have faced a fear successfully.

The answer for why we enter the ruins that scare us is rooted in the extremes people are willing to go to in the twenty-first century to obtain the 'high' that comes with initiating one's threat response. The fact that "people in the twenty-first century want a hands-on experience" has led museums and historic sites to incorporate activities that allow for more active participation (Kerr, *Scream* 32). Going to a modern abandoned building insists on hands-on participation. The abandoned building's lack of structure allows for an open format tour; anyone who visits a ruin must follow the path allowed for by the ruin rather than a path designed by the constrictions of a tour. On the importance of tactile participation that comes with exploration, Kerr stated, "Nothing can compare to actually being in a space and having all of our senses are engaged" (Personal interview).

Since urban exploration is a choice, it allows people to electively tap into the rush of discovery. This exploration, sometimes frightening, helps to re-prioritize our attention. "It makes sense when thinking about how much of our daily activities are taking place in our head…all of that is kind of wiped out as we're fully present in a moment and paying attention to our environment" in a tactile fun fear situation (Kerr,

personal interview). Urbexing becomes exciting because of the unknown and because, truly, when we first open the door to an abandoned building, anything could be inside.

To close this exploration of the ruins we fear, let's string all these concepts together: humans enjoy ghost stories and begin to seek more physical means of thrill via ice slides and then roller coasters; this leads them to the haunted house or dark ride attraction. The first haunted house attractions in the U.S. were after all *in* abandoned buildings. The next jump, from haunted house to a 'real' haunted house or modern ruin only seems natural. Even ruin comes full circle.

How much of a correlation is there between the rise in the haunt industry in the United States and the interest in urban exploring? I'd say there's no doubt that the same person who enjoys fear, who seeks thrills, is the same person climbing into the attic of an abandoned house. Whether they know it or not, Urbexers and teenage trespassers alike are creating a chemical reaction in their body that mimics actual threat response, making the positive effects of fear one of the first and actually least scary explanations for ruin exploration. We can overcome our initial feelings about the scariness of an abandoned building enough to transcend our anxieties and find a place to positively confront our fears. As long as urban exploration is done legally and safely, the negative aspects of Urbexing should not pose a problem. For the thrill-seekers of today the haunted house attraction is not enough; they want the abandoned building to create a tangible reality which mimics the fear their daredevil brain is already hardwired to enjoy.

CHAPTER FOUR: Tragedy in Ruin and the Morbid Tourist

> To delight in the aspects of *sentient* ruin might appear a heartless pastime, and the pleasure, I confess, shows the note of perversity.
> —Henry James, *Italian Hours*

A car accident on the opposite side of the road holds up traffic while drivers slow to rubberneck. People read endless accounts about the Holocaust. When a plane collided with the first World Trade Center tower, the world stopped and watched. And couldn't stop watching. The sites of these tragedies can become the places we visit: to lay memorials, to understand our past, and to never forget. It often appears that tragedy is so remarkably interesting, we sometimes can't look away. Disaster and tragedy arouse within us fear: fear of the thought of being in a car accident ourselves, terror at the atrocities manufactured by our history, anxiety after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, and the basic fear of the uncertainty of our own deaths. When will our lives end and how? It is not unusual to feel both "debased and exhilarated by our fears, scared to death but more alive than ever" (Wilson 41). The thought of our final tragedy, our death, scares us, but it also thrills us.

What is a tragedy? Tragedy is defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary as "a disastrous event" and something that is tragic as "regrettably serious or unpleasant." Despite the negative reality of these definitions, humans are vastly attracted to tragedy. Writer Kristen Radtke realized that, on some level, "we all do it. Fantasize disaster. Perhaps that's why we stare and get angry when we look too long," (271-272). What is it that creates this strange behavior? Carl Jung introduced the psychoanalytical concept of the shadow in the human psyche. Jung's shadow includes morbid impulses, and "though we hate the shadow, we also secretly desire it because in our deepest recesses we actually

yearn for ruin" (Wilson 43). The shadow encompasses all that is dark within in us and a desire to view horror reveals parts of our psyche we might otherwise try to hide. We may despise our darker half, but that does not mean we are not willing to get in touch with it. The concept of life and death living so closely together creates quite the contradiction. This concept is known as the tragedy paradox.

The tragedy paradox functions often in many people's everyday lives. It allows for contradictory concepts, even though incompatible, to live side by side in our head. Just as the "incongruity in the ruin helps in the isolation, detection, and characterization of appealing feature" so too does tragedy in life help draw attention to the beauty of life (Ginsberg 52). Fear and fun have already been proven to have chemically consistent similarities, and it is not a far stretch to imagine that tragedy and the things that make us curious can share the same space as well. Tragedy/Death and Beauty/Love/Life are always and immediately intertwined. These are some of the strongest themes running through the stories we tell, no matter what platform we use to tell them, and they are distinctly stitched into the very fabric of our lives.

The concept of the tragedy paradox can be traced back as far as Aristotle, who in his Poetics states, "the tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear, and the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation" (Aristotle 1468). Aristotle was referring to the hallmarks of a well written tragic play. But art imitates life, and it is both pity and fear which he is addressing as being effective in arousing pleasure in an audience. A main body of William Shakespeare's work in the 16th and 17th centuries was dedicated to plays with tragic ends. Tragedy plays out on the stage as it plays out in real life. The mere spectacle of it is often why we can't look away. It is "odd to seek the aesthetic" in a ruin yet the

"incongruity of our pursuit amuses, yet pleases, us" (Ginsberg 52). The fact of the tragedy paradox is that there is a relief in finding connection among chaos and beauty even in brokenness.

What tragedy is there in ruin? An abandoned structure has a hidden tragedy. There is the reason for its abandonment. Be this from the failings of economy or the nature for mankind to abandon the things we once had a use for, a ruin has been left to rot and decay. The tragedy is sometimes in the loss of architecture and history and in something that had been a part of our remembered past. Sometimes these ruins are a part of history we might rather not remember, making them 'negative' ruins. A negative ruin reminds us of the things in the past we are not proud of. But even in the absence of a ruins' story, there is still tragedy simply because a ruin lives in destruction, and rot and ruin alone are unpleasant. Rot and ruin, although natural processes, inevitably suggest death. Many modern human beings would consider death to be the last tragedy. The death of a building is tragic. Enjoying a kind of urban death is to experience the tragedy paradox.

An abandoned building reminds us of ourselves, and it makes us contemplate the times we have dealt with abandonment, and it makes us a witness to our future: we will die and decay. One day, our ruins/remains will no longer exist. The correlation between the death of a building and the representations of self in ruin are startling, and they are uniquely intertwined in Radtke's graphic memoir *Imagine Wanting Only This* where she recalls her rising obsession with ruin and how it made her contemplate her own life and her future death.

While investigating her family's history of a heart condition, which causes the heart to "beat itself to mush," Radtke so intertwines the science of the health condition with her research of abandoned places that the two became one in the same (120). Ruin gazing becomes a self-reflexive exercise making us morbidly curious about our own death. She was so consumed by the images of the ruins of our time, Radtke states that "some nights I pulled up the hem of my clothes and clawed at my skin, searching for signs that I was becoming one," (Radtke 111). The fear of her family's heart disease, of death and of mortality, draw Radtke to ruins rather than repulse her, and they cause her to recognize that eventually, we will all become ruins ourselves. The human body is a fleeting vehicle through which we maneuver life. We seek signs of our own human frailty in the same way we watch for rotten floorboards and unstable support beams, wondering what part of the human structure will fail in the same way the skeleton of a building eventually breaks beyond repair. The abandoned building is a reminder that nothing, not even humanity, lasts forever. We are all "the ruin of that self we might have been, the leftover self of the self that has not been" (Ginsberg 416). The thought of who we might have been otherwise torments the psyche; the possibility of a ruin becoming something else fascinates us.

Radtke's unusual obsession with abandonment becomes almost self-destructive as she travels from the streets of the ghost town of Gary, Indiana, to the once abandoned island town of Heimaey in Iceland and through the ruins of Asia. Throughout her journey, she attempts to find meaning and assign value to what she sees in an attempt to understand the finality of death. As Radtke states, "I understood logically why we cannot live forever. But I couldn't comprehend why the dead couldn't be made undead." (117).

The ability to contemplate death is unique to humans and was acquired through the evolutionary need to become more intelligent for survival. To deal with death awareness, humans have created many means through which to comprehend it: "we create culture, religion, and narratives that give life and death meaning," and we use these inventions to "protect us from the anxiety of knowing we will die" (Kerr, *Scream* 137-138). As Radtke discovers after the death of her uncle from the family's genetic heart disease, sometimes there is no solace in the knowledge that the human body abandons itself, that flesh and organs and mind fail and turn to ruin.

In Indiana, Radtke sketches a picture of the decay as being post-apocalyptic, her companion even stating that it appeared as if "someone pulled a fire alarm and no one ever came back" (Radtke 25). At the ruins of the cathedral, Radtke stumbles on a pile of molding photographs left among the refuse. She takes the photographs with her, a choice she later regrets, and wishes to return them. She had later discovered that the photographs were part of a memorial to an urban explorer, Seth Thomas, who had been hit and killed by a train while photographing it. Radtke states of unearthing Thomas' story, "I tried to invent significance to my finding of him, or the relics of him. As if taking his pictures to Europe and leaving them there had released him somehow, set him free from the corner of Indiana I had no evidence he actually felt stuck in" (Radtke 224). Thomas had been a self-labeled "urban explorer" who had wanted to take "panoramic and wide-angle shots of decay" (Radtke 38) and instead his "camera was found, shattered, near his body" (Radtke 39). His own memorial became a part of the decay of the world he loved to photograph. The intensity with which the explorer sought decay led him to his death, and through her connection to ruin, Radtke discovers awareness and

acceptance of death. The feeling of attachment and loss Radtke feels in regards to Thomas' photos attempts at understanding our lived relationship with abandonment, how his story became her story.

The experience with ruin and with abandonment is dependent on the ruin, its story, and history. "There are no uneasy questions of mortality before Mayan temples and Roman fortresses. The people drank lead, or they sacrificed each other, or they ground up poisonous flowers that brought the sun god down to them. These were a people nothing like us. There were people who did not have what we have now. We forget that everything will become no longer ours" (Radtke 154-155). The exercise of ruin gazing becomes self-reflexive, our interest in tragedy becomes a journey through viewing ourselves as humans and as mortals in a seemingly infinite world. The decay of the modern world reflects the world we inhabit, and in seeing ourselves in the abandoned structure, we are drawn by its innate sense of self through stone, nail, and board akin to our blood, flesh, and bone. To be a witness to the tragedy of ruin is to bear witness to the reality of death. This makes morbid curiosity and the tragedy paradox seem a lot less taboo.

The tragedy paradox and the term morbid curiosity are often interrelated. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines morbid as "abnormally susceptible to or characterized by gloomy or unwholesome feelings." To be interested in the tragedy of a ruin is to be morbidly curious. While fantasizing disaster seems irreverent, the morbid can also be "ameliorative" (Wilson 23). It eases the suffering of death. If the abandoned building reminds us of our own mortality, it also exhibits that we are not alone in the reality of death. Death awareness frightened evolved *Homo sapiens* so much that we live

in mortal terror of the reality of our own death. So, it is not especially difficult to believe that, over the last centuries, we have attempted to remove ourselves from it.

It would seem a paradox that we need to be reminded of death, but in the United States we do not live closely with our dead. Censoring death, and dying is truly a development of the last century. In a study done of American funeral practices, Gary Laderman stated that "until the early years of the twentieth century there had been no "separation of death from everyday life" (3), "people usually suffered and died in their own homes. Adults and children alike were intimate with death—its sounds and its smells, the agony of it, and its peace" (Wilson 9). More recently, there is a phenomena of funerals taking place within the home in the United States, a practice so early in its development at this time to yet be considered more than a fad. It is still standard for humans to be removed from the process of dying and the procedures of caring for the dead. For the most part, "patients are kept in hospitals or nursing homes with access restricted to friends and family" and "doctors talk about dying in technical, scientific, and biomedical terms rather than plain ones; in some cases, family and friends do the same thing" (Kerr, *Scream* 138). In this way humans have distanced themselves from the dying process. With the latest developments in medicine, people are able to live longer and live through diseases or injuries that would have killed them only the century before making death appear to be almost optional, as if a battle is being lost. But death includes a specific unknown: no human can know the date, means, or location of their death. Much like an abandoned house, it is the inevitable unknown of death that frightens and intrigues us. In viewing a ruin, we may hope to discover something about our own death.

In the winter of 2014, I had been dreaming for days of an abandoned building on a hill with crumbling stone steps leading up to it. I thought I had seen a picture of it somewhere but could not place it and begun to think I had imagined it. Opening up the newspaper one morning, I found the building on the front page. *My God,* I thought, *it's the picture from inside my head.* I hadn't made up the mansion on the hill after all: it was Blairsden Mansion (see Fig. 18), the former home of investment banker Clinton Ledyard Blair and the finest example of Beaux Arts architecture in the United States (Sceurman and Moran 212). The article in the newspaper was announcing that the mansion would be featured as part of the Mansion in May fundraiser. The fundraiser allows local historic buildings to be opened for tours as a showcase, allowing a look into buildings which would normally be inaccessible to the public. The picture used in the newspaper was similar to the one I had been accessing in my subconscious: photographed from the bottom of the hill, looking up the steps toward the mansion.

Figure 18: Reflecting Pool At Blairsden Mansion

I *had* seen the photo before, I realized, back in a friend's basement as we flicked through old issues of *Weird NJ* magazines at odd hours of the early mornings. I had apparently been dreaming of it ever since, and now I could pay to go see it in person. After realizing the connection to Weird NJ, I found the mansion listed in the first volume of the Weird NJ book and read and re-read the accounts of "reclusive religious sects" and

the "screaming nun" who chased visitors down the stairs and away from the property (Sceurman and Moran 212). As it turns out, morbid curiosity had been leading me to Blairsden Mansion in Peapack-Gladstone, NJ.

These stories of local ghosts and terror had been following me since high school. I went to the mansion as a paid visitor in May 2014 and found myself let down that the mansion had been completely refurbished. I *wanted* screaming nuns and evidence of a bloody massacre. I was morbidly curious, hoping to see the ghosts talked about in the pages of the Weird NJ book. I was hoping, in the very least, to walk down to the bottom of the stone steps and look up, to see in reality the picture I had been looking at in my subconscious. But someone had purchased the mansion and completely renovated it, a profoundly positive advance for preservation, and yet I still had *wanted* decay. I felt that I had been "cheated of the ruin in its purity" and the choreographed format of the tour was a manipulation of my experience with the ruin (Ginsberg 307). I, a staunch historic preservationist, had gone to Blairsden out of the morbid hope to see evidence of death and destruction, and instead I found a showcase for interior decorating. Talk about a paradox. Instead, I had to settle for a photograph of the stairway from on top of the hill, looking down (see Fig. 19).

Figure 19: The Way Down From Ruin

I had to ask myself, as many others have before me: Is what I was feeling wrong? The simple answer to relieve these worries is: No. But a question like this one deserves an answer longer than one word. Kerr wrote a whole chapter on it; Wilson an entire book. But my own answer must speak directly to the issue of abandonment and ruin. Why is it ok to enter the ruin and watch it decay? Bearing witness to past horror can lead to positive results. Just as experiencing a safe fear situation in a haunted house can have lasting positive effects, so too can a person's morbid curiosity lead them in a productive direction.

The best example of this is given by Wilson in his novel. The writer Thomas Hardy, when he was sixteen, witnessed the public hanging of Martha Elizabeth Brown in 1856, who had been convicted of the murder of her husband after finding him guilty of infidelity. Hardy climbed a tree just to watch the spectacle, which he would remember vividly even when he was eighty, remarking, "what a fine figure [Brown] showed against the sky as she hung in the misty rain, and how the tight black silk gown set off her shape as she wheeled half round and back" (Hardy qtd. in Wilson 111). This memory is a tight mixture of "the morbid and the erotic," something Hardy was likely ashamed to admit (Wilson 111). But the hanging of Brown inspired one of Hardy's most enduring novels, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, written in 1891. The novel explores the "relationships between fate and freedom, justice and injustice, action and irony" through the story of a woman who kills a man who once raped her and is hanged for her deed (Wilson 116). Obviously, Hardy bearing witness to the hanging did not end with some erotic thoughts on a rainy day.

Instead, “Hardy’s imagination empowered him to transcend his immediate response to the macabre, callously erotic, and discover deep significance in the morbid occurrence” (Wilson 116). This reveals another origin of morbid curiosity, “one that adds to the erotic and transcends it” and create an “admirable desire to contemplate life’s most meaningful mysterious—love and death, and their vexed connection” (Wilson 117). A morbid curiosity is an acceptable trait to have if we allow tragedy to transcend fate and generate compassion. I felt close to this feeling when I walked through the Cemetery in Sleepy Hollow, finding the joint grave of three children who had died one winter in 1871 when their sled fell through the ice at a mill pond (see Fig. 20). Ruin gazing in cemeteries can feel wrong, but not if the dead are respected.

Figure 20: The Grave Of The Drowned Children

Dangling among the concepts of tragedy paradox and morbid curiosity is the German concept of *Schadenfreude* or harm-joy. This is the “pleasure we take in another’s misfortune” (Wilson 89). This is the desire we feel to see the monsters get what they deserve. *Schadenfreude* is a desire to watch other’s suffering, but it is also related to a human’s desire for justice. This concept is no stranger to the United States. The entire modern American prison system was built on the concept of using the institution to justly punish a perpetrator for a crime. As an effect of this conviction, “Americans are fascinated with serial killers because we thrill to their capture and punishment” (Wilson 85). The history of murder in the 1996 film *The Frighteners,*

becomes the source of a viewer's morbid fascination in the narrative. The film revolves around the fictional abandoned Fairwater Sanatorium, which had been the site of thrill killings by orderly Johnny Bartlett. Closed after the murder of twelve people, the hospital had remained empty for decades. The property is left to decay, except for the Administrator's house, inhabited by Patricia Ann Bradley, recently released from over twenty years in prison for being an accomplice in the murders.

Dr. Lucy Lynskey gets her first look at the abandoned hospital when she treats Bradley for a wound and attempts to take her to the clinic for stitches. Bradley's mother prevents them from leaving the house, saying to Lynskey, "Patricia's not to be trusted…I can have her locked up any time I want to…they said she was an accessory after the fact but I know the truth. It was cold blooded murder" (*The Frighteners*). Initially, Lynskey empathizes with Bradley, believing Bradley, age 15 at the time of the murders, was not to blame for her involvement with Bartlett. In her interest in Bradley's story, Lynskey begins to research the history of the killings, watching a video titled *Murders, Madmen, & Psychopaths* in which the story is told in vivid detail with musical accompaniment and "real" footage from the day of the killings, much like the way actual documentaries on serial killers are produced.

Early in the film, Lynskey becomes morbidly curious in the story of Bradley and the history of Fairwater Sanatorium. Lynskey's husband, Ray, has a different reaction. When he finds out about her proximity to the building he states, "I don't want you going back there. The place gives me the creeps" (*The Frighteners*). Ray's reaction to the abandoned building is an expression of his sympathetic nervous system's threat response. He does not elaborate on his reaction, but his gut is telling him that there is something

wrong with the old hospital. Though Ray does not live to see the end of the film, he turns out to be right, Bradley was more than involved with Bartlett, she participated in the killings and now that she helped Bartlett return from Hell, she is determined to continue their thrill killings.

Frank Bannister, played by Michael J. Fox, is an architect turned psychic investigator after gaining the ability to see and interact with ghosts after the death of wife. With Lynskey, Bannister must try to defeat Bartlett and Bradley by bringing Bartlett's ashes to sacred ground. The path of their adventure leads them to the closest sanctuary, which is within the ruin of the hospital. The very nature of their attempt to end the perpetuation of death leads them to enter this ruin. The ruin becomes their rescue.

Throughout Bannister's trek through the hospital, because of his gift, he is caught between seeing the hospital as it is in ruin and flashing back to how it looked the day of the murders. Through these visions, he witnesses the murders as they unfolded that day. In these transitions, the ruin becomes safer than the memory of pristine white walls and polished floors. The memory of the hospital as a whole is perverse because of the murders, while the ruin offers protection as Bannister attempts to make his way to the sanctuary. Pursued by an armed Bradley and a misguided FBI agent, Bannister attempts to navigate the ruin without getting caught. Eventually he finds himself in the middle of his pursuers and uses the rotten floor to save himself from the gunshots. He does, however, fall three stories through the floor to the basement below. He survives, the script demands it, and he is able to finally use the psychic power that had haunted him since his wife's death for good. The movie *The Frighteners* successfully flips the idea of the perverse on its head: ruin is refuge rather than horror.

So, where do we draw the line for morbid curiosity? The obvious answer would be when visiting the ruin becomes a danger to ourselves or others. The ruin is a danger to ourselves when entering the structure leads to venturing on unstable ground. Like Bannister falling the three stories through the floor of the hospital, the threat of physical harm is real in entering a condemned building. I had a dream once that I was in an abandoned asylum and became separated from the group. I walked down a dark hallway onto a rotten wooden floor and fell down two stories into the basement. I woke up exhilarated. But I thought of that rotten floor from my dream the next time I stepped into an abandoned house.

The ruin becomes a danger to others when dark tourists deviate from acceptable expressions of morbid curiosity. Dark tourism is the practice of visiting sites with a connection to a history of crime, tragedy, or death. While it is true that people have always been interested in places of death, there is no denying there has been a rise in the number of people visiting these sites. Although, this jump could also be explained by the growth of the tourism industry rather than a rise in people's morbid curiosity (Wilson 153). Dark tourist sites are very common and are visited by a record number of people every year. Dark tourism sites can include battlefields and cemeteries, locations of assassinations and murder, and places of human suffering, such as hospitals or asylums (see Fig. 21).

Figure 21: The Empty Hospital

Dark tourism itself isn't wrong. But as it is noted in an article, *"*Are We All Dark Tourists*"* from the magazine *A Traveler's Guide to Dark Tourism,* there is "sometimes a fine line between remembering individuals and in making them a gimmick" and "many sites struggle between the balance between education and entertainment" (12-14). As long as the site is operated ethically, there is something to be learned from these dark places. There is more to learn from history when it is put on display than when it is buried. But a dark tourism site needs to "consider how it presents its artifacts, and how it tells its story" and in choreographing an ethical presentation this can encourage the dark tourist "to behave ethically" too ("Are We All Dark Tourists" 15). Dark tourism, like fear, has its good points. Interest in dark tourist sites can "stimulate the imagination toward exceptionally dynamic empathy" (Wilson 156). But the unfortunate truth of dark tourism is that it also draws crowds of people who "treat tragedy like an amusement park ride" and "encourages the reduction of suffering to a commodity" (Wilson 156). Abandoned buildings, which are not moderated, can become the site of unruly and devious intentions. This is one of the most negative aspects of ruin gazing, that the interpretation of the story might lead to the perpetuation of further suffering.

On the surface, ruin gazing is simply the voyeuristic pleasure of looking at something which is in a process of death. Logic would tell us there is no suitable reason to find pleasure in ruins, and yet many of us so obviously do. But there is not only tragedy in ruin: "the ruin celebrates the continuity of the living. We carry on, and so does it," even if in a process of decay (Ginsberg 108). Abandoned places offer a different type of aesthetic, one that can be both cathartic and transformative if we allow it. It was a

morbid curiosity and a desire for adventure that set the Goonies[1] on their quest for treasure on an abandoned pirate ship and sent the boys of Stephen King's *The Body* [2] along the train tracks in search of the ruined body of a dead boy. In both narratives the characters are transformed by their discoveries and transcend the darkness of their journeys. To do this ourselves, we must enter the ruin. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines "enter" as "to go or come in" but also as "to make a beginning" and to "be a factor." To become a part of the culture of abandoned places successfully, one must allow the ruin to become a factor in their life *and* in their death, to accept that ruin is both ending and beginning. Beauty and decay intertwine, and they open up passages to ourselves that we might have otherwise been afraid to venture down.

[1] See 1985 film *The Goonies* directed by Richard Donner.

[2] See King's 1982 short story collection *Different Seasons.*

CHAPTER FIVE: Entering the Ghost of a Ruin and Studying the Un-Haunted House

The wise man knows what he does *not* know—and the prudent man
respects what he does not control.
—Reverend John Nicola, preface to
The Amityville Horror

What is there to know about what we do not understand about abandonment, and how do we respect when the ruin is out of our control? How much of the cultural drive toward modern ruin is credited to the promise of the paranormal? The pull of the modern ruin is sometimes intertwined with the realm of the supernatural. It is an illogical, logical connection: "Each spectator [of the ruin] is forced to supply the missing pieces from his or her own imagination and a ruin therefore appears different to everyone" (Woodward 15). If what we do not know about ruin is why it frightens us, our subconscious/imagination supplies the pieces of the ruins' story that is missing, offering an explanation with something that is out of our control: the afterlife. We see in ruin and abandonment what we want to see. To ease our subconscious fears, our brain decides for us to see what isn't there, and we can make ourselves believe that the ruin is haunted. The journey through the culture of abandoned places has taken a sidestep, not into the Twilight Zone, but into the study of parapsychology. Get ready for the weird and the strange, this chapter is about to spirit you away to the world beyond the shadows of the ruin: welcome to the study of the haunted house.

How many people actually believe in ghosts anyway? John F. Schumaker, a psychologist who studies paranormal belief states that "cultural anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists have yet to isolate a single society in which its people do not have longstanding and well-developed systems of paranormal belief" (6). To have a

paranormal belief system does not mean a person believes in ghosts, but having one paranormal belief makes a person more open to other suggestions of the supernatural. In a 2012 poll conducted by YouGov, 45% of people taking the poll admitted to "believing in ghosts, or that the spirits of dead people can come back in certain places and situations" and an even greater 64% of people taking the poll believed at least in "life after death" ("Ghosttoplines Omnibus Poll"). It is difficult to measure belief in the supernatural, especially since many scientists do not delineate a difference between paranormal belief and religious beliefs, a concept still controversial today. For this reason, the YouGov Poll, and others similar ones, need to be taken as suggestive numbers, rather than fact. But it is still safe to say that there is a vast but unsurprising percentage of people open to the suggestion of the paranormal. But where do paranormal beliefs come from?

Evolutionary scientists trace the path of the human adapting to suit the requirements for survival and gaining enough cognitive capacity to create language and conduct "hypothetical and abstract thinking" which eventually led to complex self-awareness and therefore death awareness (Schumaker 17). Knowing that we will die separates us from other animals and creates the concept of fear in oblivion creating a need to create a pathway through which to both console and explain the necessity for the end of life. This explanation frequently manifests itself as paranormal belief. The use of abstract thinking in paranormal belief is well suited to the need for processing the incongruous form of the modern ruin

In the film version of Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House,* Mrs. Sanderson, who owns Hill House states, "as an old woman due shortly to enter the next world I

should like to know if there is one" (*The Haunting*). Interest in the paranormal is often driven by a desire to understand the afterlife. The abandoned building has already been shown to act as a symbol for death, and so the human mind easily finds the connection between death and an interest in what comes after it through an abandoned building. While so far on this urban exploration journey most Urbexers are believed to be young, interest in death and the afterlife is more common in those who are, like Mrs. Sanderson, closer to it. This means that interest in a haunted ruin for the purposes of finding clues to the afterlife very well includes all ages of explorers and ruin gazers.

Fear of the paranormal is very popular in the United States. While fear does not correlate with belief, you don't need true belief to initiate curiosity. Anyone can be interested in the idea of a haunted house even if they do not believe in it fully. As Vincent Price's character in the film *The House on Haunted Hill* states "I think everyone wonders what they would do if they saw a ghost. Now my wife has given us all an opportunity to find out." The question breaks the fourth wall of the film: Price isn't just speaking the characters in the film, he is asking the audience as a whole: who hasn't wondered what it would be like to see a ghost? Going to some of the most notoriously haunted sites would appear to be the quickest way to find out.

But where to find a haunted house? There are haunted houses everywhere. They are haunted by invisible spirits, by decay, by memory, and sometimes by ourselves. It is difficult to gauge whether or not a site is truly haunted. But whether a place is actually haunted is not so much the question as is why do we perceive these places as being haunted? There are a few base answers to this and many of them are rooted in the theories already discussed in this study. If we fear the abandoned building through our

threat responses our mind may attempt to grasp at an explanation for the fear. If no easy explanation presents itself, certain individuals may supply an answer via their subconscious belief, using their paranormal belief system as a mechanism to explain what they do not understand. Human beings can be uncomfortable with reality (the void of death and their fear of it) and use paranormal belief systems to bridge this gap. Subsequently, the abandoned building, perceived as frightening, can be believed to be haunted. These are all assumptions made through perceived threat and the body's chemical and subconscious reaction to it. We already know that even if we fear the ruin, we may not avoid it. The same can be said of haunted structures: even if we fear the supernatural, we may be drawn to that fear in our thrill-seeking hope of finding a real ghost.

People who are especially sensitive are likely to find patterns more readily than others, and these are the people who are more likely to report experiencing supernatural phenomena (Wiseman). Schumaker, stated that the reading of these patterns isn't a bad thing because "successful coping and survival became dependent upon our being able to convert chaos into imagined order" (25). Being sensitive to paranormal belief allows a person to find patterns that may (or may not) be present in an abandoned building, creating a logical, if seemingly illogical, belief that a building can be haunted. In terms of long term survival it is "better to see a few patterns that are not actually there than miss one that is" (Wiseman 306). Natural selection may very well have allowed for the persistence of paranormal belief in society. Despite the advances in science over the years there are still phenomena that are unexplained, and finding supernatural explanations for the unexplained is a coping mechanism. An urban explorer might

believe that the paranormal not only explains what they don't understand about a ruin, but makes the ruin a point of interest, and to make a ruin haunted all you need to do is look at it and allow your gut, rather than your head, to take over. Paranormal belief can draw on our fears, and if we find something disturbing in the ruin we might begin to wonder what spirit could possess it (see Fig. 22).

Figure 22: Lost Doll In The Woods

When subjects believed they were in a haunted house and were more open to paranormal activity, they were more likely to become "hyper-vigilant and pay attention to the subtlest signals," making them notice small things in the atmosphere around them that would have otherwise been easily ignored, making them even more afraid and hyper-vigilant in the process (Wiseman 224). A feeling often reported after entering a building that is reported to be haunted includes feeling a cold spot or a chill. While the paranormal explanations could be involved in this experience, known science offers its own explanation. The chill one feels from a scary experience relates to the fact that in a fear situation the "blood rushes away from your skin and your muscles to prepare for fighting or running causing your skin temperature to drop" (Kerr, *Scream* 111). Our minds and our bodies often seem as if they are playing tricks on us when in reality they are reacting to situations through the best method through which our instincts are programmed to keep us alive.

The known history of a building can lead a person to believe a site is haunted. If the site is a "negative" historical site, or what can be considered a dark tourism site, the

chances that certain individuals will believe the site to be haunted can increase. Sites we associate with suffering (prisons, asylums, and hospitals to name a few) are often subsequently associated with ghosts. While belief that "bad deaths" directly correlate to the subsequent haunting of a building is more often related to Japanese tradition, that is not to say that American paranormal beliefs do not follow the same transitions. If someone is in touch with their morbid curiosity and also susceptible to paranormal belief, these two criteria are at work when a person views an abandoned structure associated with tragedy.

The history of a site is sometimes not easily accessible, yet that does not deter from circulation of its' perceived history. This is most often witnessed through the proliferation of urban myth in different parts of the country. Urban legend may very well be credited with the assumption of the paranormal in abandoned buildings even more so than a sites' actual history. In New Jersey urban legend there are even haunted roads. Shades of Death Road in particular has been made out to be a haunted place, and it is only a seemingly empty stretch of road that runs through the deserted countryside, abandoned except for where it isn't (see Fig. 23). "Like many places steeped in local lore, reality and legend have become intertwined over the years, obscuring exactly what can be considered fact" when it comes to Shades of Death Road (*Weird NJ*). This is often the

Figure 23: Shades Of Death

case for many abandoned structures: *we* tell a ruins' story, and *we* choose what story to tell about it. In the absence of fact, we sometimes offer the supernatural.

What also "makes" a haunted house is the representation of haunted houses in popular culture. Our fictional ghost stories become models for how we perceive ghosts in reality. Therefore, the haunted house we know through literature and film inform on which buildings we imagine to be haunted in the physical world. Take for instance Jackson's Hill House or even the House on Haunted Hill, of which we may still be "trying to figure out which is haunted/ Is it the hill?/ Or actually the house?" (The Rifftones). All joking aside, Jackson's Hill House and Price's haunted mansion in the film *House on Haunted Hill* are both archetypes of the modern perception of a "real" haunted place. For their time, they were both deeply frightening narratives, and Hill House has continued to inspire fear, resulting in 1963 and 1999 film adaptations and an even more recent Netflix spin-off series in 2018. Popular culture of the stories we tell has long been at work informing the human consciousness about what should be considered haunted.

Hill House and the House on Haunted Hill are interesting examples of the haunted house in popular culture to study: one in literature and one in film, and both released in the year 1959. While eighty year old Hill House is not a ruin, it had been "unfit for human habitation for upwards of twenty years" and basically abandoned (Jackson 51). Price's mansion in the film is only a rental, but it was "built over a century ago," and it is insinuated in the film to have been uninhabited because of the murders which had taken place there over the past years. These overlarge, shadowed, and secluded buildings become easy suspects of paranormal activity. These "Hill Houses" are buildings which

easily draw their audiences in with dark passages, numerous rooms, and, most importantly, the feeling of isolation.

As it is made quite clear by the caretaker, Jackson's Hill House is isolated by the hills that surround it, "no one lives any nearer than the town. No one else will come any nearer than that" (Jackson 27), and Eleanor interprets that to mean that at such a distance, "no one can hear you if you scream in the night" (Jackson 31). Those who enter Hill House are alone, except for whatever else walks its halls at night in the dark. Price's house forces its inhabitants to be locked in for the evening: "the windows have bars that a jail would be proud of and the only door to the outside locks like a vault," effectively cutting them off from the rest of the world (*House on Haunted Hill*). The feeling of being cut off and of not having the solace of the real world drives the terror. In the absence of the real world, belief in the supernatural takes its place.

Isolation becomes a major factor in the hysteria which unfolds at both of these houses. There is a reason that creative license on supposedly true accounts of supernatural phenomena has been used to manipulate settings. In the 1979 film version of *The Amityville Horror,* the house appears in isolation when in reality the house stands closely next to its neighbors. The reality of the location did not fit with popular perception of a "real" haunted house and was changed in the film to better suit the expectations of the audience. The book chronicling the haunting notes that the Amityville Horror House resident, George Lutz had noticed that "the neighbors' shades were all drawn on the sides that faced his house," which he finds "peculiar" even from the beginning (Anson 6). The shades, the shrouds of evergreen trees around the house,

and the malfunctioning phone lines become the isolated barrier that appear to cut the Lutz family off from the rest of the world.

Hill House and Price's House on Haunted Hill share commonalities besides their exceptional isolation and imposing stature: both buildings are the site of past horror. Hill House witnessed the death of four individuals before Eleanor set foot in its doorway and Price's mansion, seven. The knowledge of a tragic history manipulates a person's perception of supposedly haunted events. The "power of suggestion" greatly informs on the human belief in paranormal activity (Wiseman 228). By being told something is haunted, like the barren stretch of Shades of Death Road, the idea of haunted activity becomes real. All who enter the Hill Houses are told about the tragedies which had taken place there leading to their own interpretation of the events that follow. In Hill House, the past tragedy helps to explain the very real haunting which occurs, while in Price's mansion the guests are led to suspend their disbelief of the supernatural long enough for Price to use their hysteria to cover the murder of his wife and her lover. In the fictional world, as well as the physical one, the presence of a past tragic history helps to create a present one.

Isolation and a previous history of tragedy are the first ingredients to the making of a haunted, or seemingly haunted, house. This pattern has been followed in popular literature and film for years: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Henry James' 1898 novel *The Turn of the Screw* and the 1961 film, *The Innocents*, inspired by his story, Stephen King's 1977 work *The Shining*, the 1980 film *The Changeling*, the 1999 film *The Blair Witch Project*, and the 2004 film *The Grudge*. We even find an isolated haunted house in Toni Morrison's enduring 1987 novel,

Beloved, and an obsession with the ruins outside his walls haunt the Magistrate even in his dreams in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The "poignancy of a return to a ruined home is one of the oldest and most universal themes of literature," and it is no surprise that we see this theme often moderated through a haunted house (Woodward 45). After a century of creative representation of what constitutes a haunted house, the human mind is attempting to find them in reality. The real question in the end may be: how much has fiction informed on popular belief in the paranormal and how much has experiences of the paranormal inspired these stories in the first place? Further study of this concept would be worthwhile in future understanding of how paranormal belief drives interest in modern ruins. Either way, the "evil old house, the kind some people call haunted is like an undiscovered country waiting to be explored" (*The Haunting*). Now all that is left to do is to enter the haunted ruin.

The historic, Victorian Era town of Cape May, NJ is marketed as one of the most haunted places in the country. Despite being New Jersey's oldest seaside resort town, Cape May claims to have nearly as many ghosts as it has residents. Since the town is on the National Historic Register, most of the buildings have now been restored and are no longer the ruins they had been decades ago, but that has not apparently dissuaded the

Figure 24: The Southern Mansion At Dusk

ghosts. The town is popular any time of the year for ghost tours, and many tourists and residents alike have claimed to be touched by something paranormal. One of Cape May's most famous ghosts, Esther of the Southern Mansion, has caught many a person's gazing eye from where she haunts the copula at night (see Fig. 24 on previous page). I would say all that talk about Esther's ghost is just a way to attract tourists, except that I've seen her.

I have worked as a tour guide with the horse and carriage company in Cape May off and on for the last five years, and I've had a few unexplained experiences. But none of them were quite like the time I was out on tour late one night driving by the Southern Mansion when I glanced up at the cupola. What I saw up there in the tiny room I know to be off limits to the public was the figure of a woman in a wide-brimmed hat standing at the window. I was so surprised I almost couldn't look away. But, given that I was driving, I told the horse, Stormy, to walk on and continue down Washington Street. What had I seen in the cupola that night? Had my own renditions of Esther's hauntings been enough to open my mind to the power of suggestion about the haunted mansion? The mansion had, after all, been nearly demolished after falling into great disrepair before being converted into a bed and breakfast. During its time as a ruin it had been widely known by local accounts as a "haunted house." I wasn't sure exactly what I had seen that night but it brought up two important points about haunted houses: first, how does a reputation for being haunted affect modern ruin and, second, if I, a skeptic, was susceptible to paranormal imaginings in a refurbished ruin, how might I react to visiting a potential haunted house that was still abandoned? I was determined to find out.

To answer the first point, just read any edition of a Weird NJ magazine. This state alone is rampant with supposed hauntings, many of which take place at truly innocuous, but visually spooky, abandoned places. Interest in the supposed paranormal, on a basic level, has put these sites on the map making them tourist destinations. To answer the second question, I thought I would go trekking out into the woods of New Jersey. But first, I talked to some ghost experts.

I spoke with Psychic Medium and author, Craig McManus, about the hauntedness of abandoned buildings. McManus suggested that the people who are exploring possibly haunted sites could just be looking for a thrill, but some of them may have "true psychic/intuitive ability." Their interest could also be a combination of both. A person would need to have had psychic training to recognize and communicate with spirits in a building, McManus told me in an interview, and for some people, "exploring and then photographing interiors of abandoned buildings may be as close as they can get to a psychic connection." Therefore, people interested in the paranormal could be pulled toward the spirit energy in these structures without really knowing why.

To help with balancing insight into the paranormal I also had a long discussion about the supernatural with Seth Pollock from the paranormal investigative team Ghost-One. Ghost-One is a science based research initiative. They work by the scientific standard that nothing can be said to be haunted without "repeatable proof" (Pollock). The absence of repeatable proof is the easiest way to debunk supposed paranormal activity. Formed in the early 80s, Ghost-One has been collecting scientific data for years and still maintain that they are far from proving the existence of the supernatural. As a group of "skeptics" who are neither "believers nor non-believers," the goal of the Ghost-

One team is to find proof of ghosts, and the only way to find that proof is by "actually collecting the data" and to "investigate [a site] over long period of time" (Pollock). I had found out the best ways to gauge and measure the possibility of residual spirit energy at a spooky old house, now all that was left to do was to test it.

I realized that I didn't have a long period of time, I had no psychic training, and I was far from equipped with sophisticated equipment (I have an iPhone X), but I decided I would try to mentally test myself at a potentially hauntable site. For the purpose of true psychological investigation, having a test subject other than myself would be more professional; however, I decided it was unethical to feed one of my friends a false horror story about an old house and then try to keep a straight face when I brought them to it. So, it was up to me and my iPhone to find some ghosts.

To test my own susceptibility to the paranormal, I walked out into the woods to revisit a house I have referred to many times as "The Blair Witch House" (see Fig. 25). Despite its non-relation to the house in the film, this house had become 'haunted' in my imagination mostly because the first time I had found it, one gloomy day of freezing rain in December, I stumbled upon it when I wasn't looking for ruin. Where I thought there to only be woods, I found a very spooky looking house. The sudden appearance of the decaying house through the fog on the trail was enough to create the sympathetic nervous system response: *this house is haunted*. The house is old, but despite evidence that it was

Figure 25: Back Door To A Haunting

abandoned when Interstate 80 went in sometime in the seventies, there are no other hints as to how long it has been left to ruin. But a "house doesn't have to be old to be haunted" (Pollock). I knew that, but at the time I found the house, my rational mind was not talking to my gut. My gut said the house was unnerving, and my brain wasn't in charge enough in the first seconds of discovery to disagree. In the absence of a known history, my brain created its own, relating the house to the sudden and deeply horrendous appearance in the woods of the house in the film *The Blair Witch Project.* I had come to my own "Blair Witch House" through my subconscious connection of the isolated and decaying structure I remembered from popular culture. After my initial response to the house, once my brain took over again, I realized the New Jersey house wasn't at all like the house in the film, and I refer to it now as "The House with the Slate Roof."

There were, I might say unfortunately, no ghosts in Slate Roof. There is much evidence of the physical haunting of the house, of trespassers and graffiti artists who have taken it upon themselves to convert the house into their playground and impress upon it their own horror story. With a sense of the morbid, these artists have left jarring (and also amusing) messages: scrawling '666' on walls and painting words such as 'Turn Back Now' on the wall when you first enter and 'this is where they found me,' inside a closet. These trespassers have left the debris of their revels as if the ruin is a place that is disposable or as if it can safeguard their secrets (see Fig. 26). The people who go to Slate Roof have created their own narrative for the site, further allowing for anyone

Figure 26: Inspiration For Graffiti

else entering this ruin to have their imagination run away with them. The imagination is a powerful motivator and it can inspire some interesting, if even brief beliefs. The house is spooky enough without the graffiti, the dark basement (see Fig. 27), and the eerily empty attic. I remember McManus saying that "many old building have bottled up pockets of energy" which is known as "place energies," and I wonder what kind of energy Slate Roof could have that my untrained eye had missed.

But humans are apt to find patterns when they want to see them, which is why we look for patterns that reinforce our paranormal beliefs rather debunk them, and so we pay more attention to the things that reinforce what we are trying to believe. This does not mean that we need to have persistent proof of the correlations we are drawing between belief and proof: "according to the variable ratio schedule, only occasional 'success' is needed to sustain the belief" (Schumaker 49). I had documented Slate Roof with photos and video and looked to them later in the hope of finding proof of the paranormal. One video I took from inside from the kitchen walking down to the basement. When I watched it later, alone and at night, I heard what sounded like moaning every time the video flashed over writing on the wall that had '666.' For a second, I was excited that I had caught *something* on audio, but in the next second I realized it was only sound interference of passing tractor trailers on the interstate through the woods.

Figure 27: Slate Roof Basement

"Our urban environment is so polluted" with noise at different frequencies, that these small interferences are often to blame for audio "proof" of ghosts (Pollock). I had

allowed my subconscious to create a haunting from what wasn't there because I allowed myself to be open to the idea of the paranormal and was temporarily tricked by the atmosphere in the abandoned structure. But, as Pollock said, "you can't say something is haunted unless you have proof." The only proof I had of Slate Roof being haunted was blurry photographs of the attic and a badly recorded video. Easily repeatable, but hardly proof. Yet, the lack of a real haunted experience neither deters our interest in these sites nor the overall curiosity in the paranormal.

Paranormal research today is remarkably prevalent but is often cited as more of a thrill-seeking activity than a scientific one. The interest in the paranormal in the sites appears to be less about finding actual proof of a haunting than it is about our human desire to experience fun fear. In fact, Pollock would guess that less than 10% of urban exploration is inspired by paranormal interests. His assumption is based on his own analysis of the popularity of "paranormal investigative" videos as opposed to "urban exploration" videos available on the Internet. While statistical data is not yet available to substantiate these remarks, they appear well-grounded, and they are a potential indicator that in 2020 the American consumer is potentially becoming more interested in fact-based aesthetics of a ruin rather than to its supernatural ones. Those who enter the ruin on the promise of the paranormal are either unaware of their inability to collect significant data in supernatural research, or they are after something else entirely, perhaps without even realizing it. Even McManus stated that "plain curiosity" was mostly likely the largest driving factor behind urban exploration rather than the paranormal.

With the lack of professional data on the true hauntedness of these sites, interest in the paranormal may be only a small factor in urban exploration. The hope for a hands-

on, fun fear experience or a person's morbid curiosity can be masked as paranormal interest. Ruins are not truly haunted. You could say instead that these buildings are "haunted" by abandonment. So, we do not enter the haunted ruin, but explore instead an un-haunted house. We deal with these contradictory thoughts in our head by finding beauty *in* brokenness. We are able to find patterns between fear and fun, love and death, and comfort in the invisible. Rather than attempt to find a way to relegate these two topics into separate fields, the idea of a haunted un-haunted house can exist successfully and be sustained by the complexity of the human mind. This brokenness in our thinking is what helps to keep us alive, gets us out of bed every day, and allows us to breathe in the beauty of a world we cannot begin to entirely comprehend.

CHAPTER SIX: The Life and Death of Ruin and Historic Preservation in Our Time

> I did not want to look on him as a ruin: it was not a ruin I had hated. I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with the pain.
>
> —James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*

What is death? Death is, in a way, an abandonment, a leaving of the body behind. So much of what attracts us to ruin has revolved around the end of things. For those who believe in an afterlife, death is only the beginning. For a building, death only leads to a new beginning if we do something about it.

Historic preservation isn't a new idea: "One of the first Popes to introduce legislation to protect the few monuments that still stood was Pius II, in 1462" (Woodward 7). The use of legislation to assist in the continued existence of valuable ruin persists to this day and has been utilized in the preservation of many structures. The preservation of our past is important and "how a country treats its ruins is symptomatic of its attitude toward its identity," (Ginsberg 120). What does this say, then, about a society in which ruins are systematically demolished? There are numerous stories of loss in the efforts to preserve historic structures. The simple fact of demolition is that, once gone, there is no option of bringing the building back. With preservation, there are many options for a structure, some more sustainable than others.

Preservation, conservation, and reconstruction are costly endeavors. But so is demolition, planning, and construction. How is a decision made for a site? These are the questions that plague preservationists. In order to preserve a historic site, value must be assigned to the ruin. This value can be assigned simply because the ruin has potential by functioning as a ruin; equally therefore by ceasing to function with its original purpose. There are educational values of ruins since there is something to be learned

from the ruins of our past, and there are economic motives for preservation since tourism and commercial opportunities generate income.

The life and death of a building is dependent on the culture which surrounds it. That is to say that the ability to abandon a structure and the desire to preserve it is decided by people. The building itself decides nothing; once abandoned, nature is the only ruling force in the life-span of a building's decay. But to condemn a building to decay is not the same as to condemn to death, as we have seen through the vibrant life a building can have as a ruin. A ruin functions well as a piece of a whole, and it may appear that transitioning from the pleasure of the ruin to the thought of preservation might pose some difficulty. However, the leap from enjoying the voyeuristic pleasure of a ruin and the desire to preserve that ruin can be a small one especially when we begin to study just how many correlations there are between what draws us to ruin and the methods of preservation which have successfully saved some buildings from collapse and a figurative death. The same characteristics of what initially interested the urban explorer in ruin are the same tools which should be used to preserve the building. That is to say that the most successful preservation models are the ones which attempt to mirror the driving psychological motivations, the Ruin Lust Attractors, which called us to the ruin in the first place.

In review the Ruin Lust Attractors include: simple curiosity, connection to important historical milestones, the human imagination, nostalgia for the past, architectural interest, artistic aesthetics, ruin as a return to nature, and the ruin as contemplation of self. Then there are the motivations more deeply rooted in our human conditioning: the pleasure of fear, the intrigue of the Tragedy Paradox, and promise of the

paranormal. As it has been proven over the course of this study, these points of connection are what have given rise to the current fascination in modern ruin and help to perpetuate the culture surrounding abandoned buildings. What remains to be seen is just how close of a correlation there is between interest in abandonment and the efforts which preserve a building. Through the use of two case studies of preservation efforts, we will be able to measure just how much these two topics, ruin and the unmaking of ruin, coincide.

The two buildings subject of these case studies, Eastern State Penitentiary and Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital, were chosen first for their cultural significance and proximity to the northern New Jersey region, and secondly, because through their similarities, they will prove interesting preservation effort to compare: one ruin is thriving while the other has been demolished. These case studies will be used to measure the credibility of the theory that the characteristics that make a ruin interesting are also what gives it potential in preservation. Eastern State and Greystone had many commonalities in what made them successful ruins, and it will be through an exploration in these points that a theory on what makes a preservation model succeed or fail.

Case Study #1
Eastern State Penitentiary
ESP

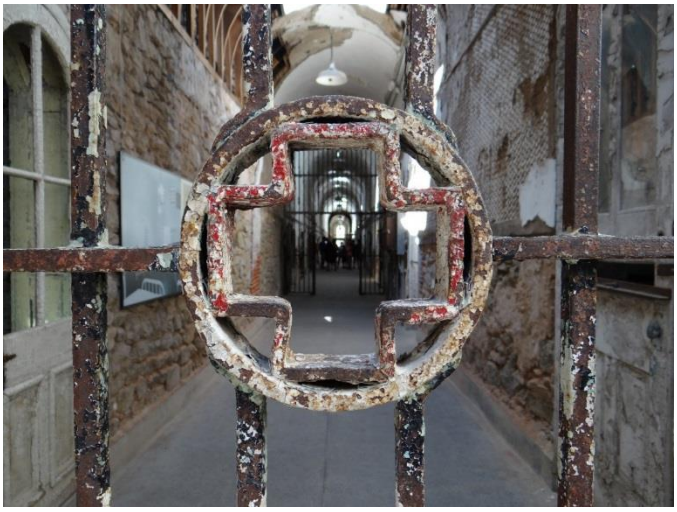

Figure 28: The Hospital Wing

Built: 1829

Location: Philadelphia, PA

Location Details: Constructed on the twelve acres of a former cherry orchard, ESP was originally situated on the outskirts of the city, a whole two miles from the edges of town.

Purpose: Prison; Intended to rehabilitate inmates through the Quaker belief in penitence.

Architect: John Haviland

Architecture: Thirty foot outer wall with a medieval façade and interior built to reassemble a monastery. Built in the hub and spoke, radial pattern, which allowed for isolation of the inmates while not inhibiting surveillance. The exterior was intended to elicit fear and deter crime while the interior had cathedral-like, barrel vaulted ceilings and Eye of God windows (see Fig. 29 on page 76) which were intended to alleviate the suffering of inmates and assist in their spiritual redemption.

Significant Facts: The radial design of ESP revolutionized the American prison system with its use of solitary confinement. Each prisoner was confined to his own eight foot by

twelve foot cell which was outfitted with such modern amenities such as central heating and indoor plumping, a luxury necessitated by the fact that contact with the outside world was forbidden. Eastern State had these amenities even before the White House.

Important Operational Notes: Originally built to hold two hundred prisoners in complete solitary confinement, the prison was filled almost immediately. Over the next decades Eastern State succumbed to overcrowding and eventually abandoned the original mission of penitence. By 1956 additions to the prison had altered the hub and spoke pattern so much that the original intent was lost and eventually the building required such costly repairs that it was closed in 1971.

Life As A Ruin: Once closed, Eastern State historian Francis X. Dolan stated that "nature reclaimed the site with surprising speed and efficiency" (8). The building was left to rot and ruin even while it stood in the center of a major American city. Demolition was thwarted over the years by a Task Force of "historians, criminologists, neighbors, and preservationists" (Dolan 8). After sitting empty for nearly a decade, the City of Philadelphia purchased the site with the intention of redevelopment. When the Eastern State Penitentiary Task Force finally entered the building in the early 90s "they were confronted by an urban jungle that had gone unchecked for almost 20 years" (Dolan 117). A non-profit group, Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, took over operations in 2001. The mission of the non-profit became not to redevelop the building, but to keep the structure in a preserved state of ruin.

Present Life: The mission of the Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site as noted on the website is to interpret "the legacy of American criminal justice reform" for the purpose of "[moving] visitors to engage in dialogue and deepen the national conversation about

criminal justice" (*Eastern State*). This revitalized mission statement is noted as being the next step in realizing the structures potential now that stabilization of the building is complete.

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What follows is an application of my theoretical Ruin Lust Attractors as they apply to this site and how those points coincide with the success of the sites' preservation.

Curiosity

In a country devoid of the medieval relics of other nations, Eastern State is an obviously curious monument. Even without any former exposure to the medieval style the castle-like ramparts of ESP easily conjure "thoughts of dungeons and torture, remnants of a feudal system that dominated Europe" (Dolan 11). Without having explicit knowledge of the medieval, Eastern State created an implicit memory response that was likely only enhanced as it sat abandoned and left to ruin.

Figure 29: The Eye Of God

Curiosity is likely the first driving force behind any visit to Eastern State today. It was certainly what drove my first visit to the site. In 2010, I had not yet realized my call to ruin, but

after setting eyes on the ramparts of the penitentiary, I had found an image that would not leave my mind. I have been talking about Eastern State ever since, and it was simple curiosity which first brought me to its iron gate.

Historical Interest

As one of the most famous buildings of its time, Eastern State has many points of historical interest, and to properly review all of them could fill volumes. Not only revolutionary for its contribution to the American prison system with the introduction of the Pennsylvania System, Eastern State went on to hold some very notorious criminals, contain a few infamous prison riots and jailbreaks, and remain as a skeletal reminder of just how far this country has come in terms of the penitentiary model.

Eastern State Historic Site has choreographed the visit to the site to help open the mind of the tourist to viewing the past and reflecting on the present. Through these exhibits, ESP is using the preservation of the penitentiary for positive discourses in society. As an entity, the Historic Site does not propose to take sides on such political conversations as mass incarceration or the death penalty, but instead presents facts in which visitors are intended to interpret with their own conclusion. In this way, Eastern State's preservation model has created an interactive method through which visitors of the site can connect with history on a level that appeases their interest in the past and intertwines it with their personal connection to the topic in the present.

Architecture

The architectural innovations of this site have already been mentioned, and it is these characteristics which widely drew interest to Eastern State as a ruin. The architectural motivation of interest in this site as a ruin directly correlated to interest in

preserving the site. During plans for reconstruction many different models were offered, but not many actually included preserving the site in its entirety. Eventually, public opinion won out, and the prison was preserved with most of its remaining structures.

Artistic Aesthetics

The intrigue of Eastern State as a ruin was so remarkable it led to the preservation plan of maintaining the site as a preserved ruin. It has been noted that "visitors to the historic site are attracted to the eerie ruin, fascinated by the deterioration of the mighty prison and intrigued by the lives of past inhabitants" (Dolan 116). For Eastern State the pull of ruin lust was so strong it became the main model for the site's preservation.

Return to Nature

A study of a ruin is a remarkable journey in discovering what is left behind. In the case of Eastern State, "artifacts such as papers, letters, boots, shoes, and furniture" were closed up along with the prison. These are the remnants which can still be viewed in this semi-ruin today. As the building was left to the whims of nature, foliage began to make its way back into the prison. Nature quickly began to grow and overtake large portions of the prison. In photographic evidence of cell blocks 3 and 14 in the early 1990s, structures had been "weakened by the overgrowth, as evidenced by the trees growing from their rooftops" (Dolan 114). While this posed a structural stabilization problem in later preservation efforts, the effect was also quite remarkable. On her own visit to ESP, Kerr noted her wonder after looking into a cell and finding that "beyond the piles of pink rubble were green leaves, moss, and branches of a tree that had refused to accept the restrictive borders of the penitentiary" (Kerr, *Scream* 71). One of the most enduring and beautiful images of the prison include a photograph entitled "Cell with

Paulownia Roots, 1994" by Mark Perrott, which depicts the return of nature to the prison (see Fig. 30). While in its day the penitentiary was very good at keeping prisoners in, in abandonment nature will not be denied.

Figure 30: "Cell with Paulownia Roots, 1994" © Mark Perrott; reproduced with permission from Perrott.

Science of Fear

The very nature of medieval architecture designed to evoke terror is nearly enough in a study of how the complex emotion of fear would have continued to be evocative as the prison sat in ruin. Likely, the feeling of foreboding and overall scariness of the site was only enhanced by its' state of ruin. As the building began to decay, the somber edifice, now preserved in that frozen state of decline, added strongly to the feelings of eeriness and overall unease that only a complex and abandoned total institution can evoke. What's more is that, like Kerr found in her study on the positive effects of fear, many people like the fact that ESP scares them. This feeling of fear was so strong that it directly led to one of the arguably most successful preservation tactics used by this site: making an attraction which turned fear into profit.

Every year, millions of people are drawn to haunted house attractions. It was reported by the Haunted House Association in an article by *Popular Mechanics* writer, Matt Blitz, about the history of the haunt attraction that the haunt industry makes an "annual estimated revenue of $300 to $500 million" making fear a very profitable industry. The Eastern State Penitentiary Task Force began holding haunted events within the walls of ESP as early as 1991, before historic tours had even begun. Riding off of the initial success of these programs the event was branded the Terror Behind the Walls Tour in 1995 and includes the transformation of a "real prison into a massive haunted house" (Dolan 127). The Terror Behind the Walls haunted attraction at Eastern State Penitentiary has reported over "a hundred thousand" visitors in a single season (Kerr 196) and is one of the "largest haunted houses in the world and is the single biggest source of revenue for the historic site" (Dolan 127). By harnessing the power of fear

which Eastern State Penitentiary inspired as a ruin, the historic site has been able to create a sustainable model for preservation.

Tragedy Paradox/Morbid Curiosity

When Eastern State was first constructed, the world was watching, and it drew many visitors from across the globe curious to see the Pennsylvania System in action. Besides the later notations of the negative effects of solitary confinement, over the prison's 142 years in operation there are also many stories of murder, injury, mistreatment, and riot making Eastern State and easy subject for what can be considered a "negative" historic site. These facts about Eastern State's history are likely what drew the attention of many a morbidly curious mind to the ruin, and it is also what draws the attention of many visitors today. Institutions in general, while "not inherently 'evil'" are considered some of the "scariest places in the world" because of their relation to many of "history's most tragic and horrendous crimes against humanity (Kerr, *Scream* 54). As one of these total institutions, Eastern State is an easy target for dark tourism, and yet it uses its checkered past as a method to teach and rise above rather than create spectacle. Eastern State has a comprehensive historical tour which illuminates what life was like on both sides of the cell door. Through this unique strategy, Eastern State is able to divert dark

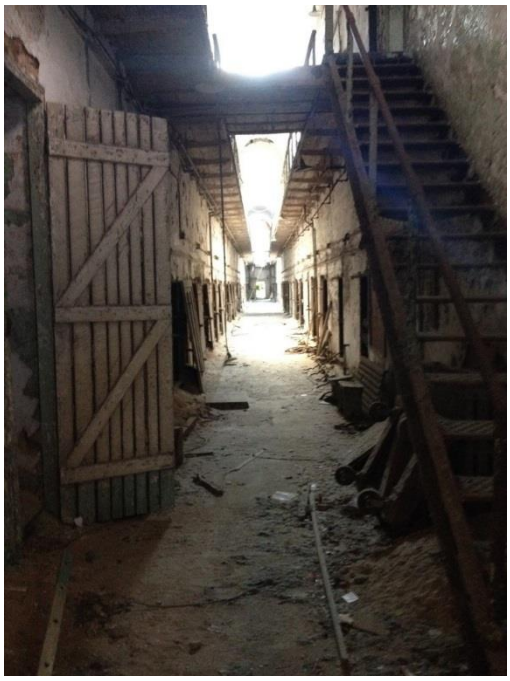

Figure 31: Cell Block Ruins

tourism into something both productive and self-reflective.

Paranormal Superstitions

What would a large, abandoned, old prison be without a few ghosts? Eastern State Penitentiary is believed to have a few of them. The rumors of ghosts in the penitentiary by many accounts began before the site was even closed including notorious criminal Al Capone stating he was being haunted by the ghosts of some of the men he had killed while he served his time behind the walls of Eastern State. While I was unable to find at the time of this writing textual evidence of paranormal accounts as the prison lay in ruin, I do not doubt that they exist. Especially with the outpouring of paranormal superstitions that proliferate about the prison now that it is open to the public and stabilized for safety, I believe many people would have thought the site to be haunted when it was abandoned, especially if they had mustered the courage to venture inside.

In its present life as a preserved ruin, Eastern State Penitentiary is considered one of the most haunted buildings in the world. It has been investigated by teams of paranormal researchers, appears in magazines devoted to the world's scariest and most haunted places, and fits the criteria for a "haunted house" as outlined in the previous chapter: large and overbearing architecture, sense of isolation within its walls despite the encroachment of the city around it, and a preserved state of ruinous decline that can do nothing other than remind visitors of death and of the many unhappy souls who passed their hours behind those walls. With the atmosphere pervading ESP, it's easy for even a non-believer to imagine what isn't there.

The scientific driving forces which made Eastern Sate suitable ruin porn offered tactics for the creative directors to use for its preservation. This is not to say that psychology alone saved Eastern State. "Without public support the prison may have vanished a long time ago" (Dolan 6). Public support, as well as the willingness of the officials responsible for the site to listen to public opinion, inevitably saved Eastern State. The responsibility of the preservationist is therefore to craft a convincing model for preservation. Showcasing the ways in which a site has already been successful as a ruin can therefore begin an important discussion on the future preservation of the site.

Case Study #2
Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital
Greystone

Figure 32: Greystone In Sunlight

Built: 1876

Location: Parsippany, NJ

Location Details: Built on a hilltop on 740 acres two miles from town.

Purpose: Rehabilitation of the mentally ill.

Architect: Samuel Sloan

Architecture: Designed in the Kirkbride Plan initiated by mental health advocate Dr. Thomas Kirkbride, the asylum was quite literally built out of the stone from the ground it stood on, eventually earning it the moniker "Greystone," (Tagliareni and Mathews, *Greystone* 13). The architecture was designed in the Second Empire style, still in fashion at the time of construction. Despite the asylums' eventual negative history, it was originally built on the theories of compassion. It was a formidable structure with an ornate facade, ample windows to allow in plenty of natural light, and a beautiful vaulted dome topping the administration building, which was the iconic main entrance. Patients

were meant to feel as if they were at a resort.

Significant Facts: Greystone was truly an architectural marvel of its time; it was the largest single foundation structure in the world before the completion of the Pentagon.

Important Operational Notes: Originally built to hold 800 patients, the population had grown to nearly 1,200 by 1895, after only nineteen years in operation. Later many additional structures were added to the grounds of the original building as an attempt to alleviate the issue of overcrowding. Eventually, Greystone, like many other asylums, became nothing more than a place where "the mentally and physically handicapped were being warehoused" (Tagliareni and Mathews, *Greystone* 89). The 1970s saw a widespread deinstitutionalization of patients which marked the beginning of the end for Greystone. The last patients were moved from the Kirkbride building in 1988, and the administration building eventually ceased operations in 2008.

Life As A Ruin: After closing down, the disused buildings sat abandoned for the next seven years. The structures sat in slow decline as the state battled for its destruction against the non-profit group Preserve Greystone.

Present Life: Demolished by the state in 2015, the land where Greystone once stood is now part of the public park system.

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What follows will be an application of my theoretical Ruin Lust Attractors as they apply to this site. Since the site is no longer standing, the potential for the use of these points of attraction in ruin and how they could have applied to a potential preserved site are implied.

Curiosity

Greystone was a mammoth of a building. Likewise to Eastern State, it was situated at the top of a hill and became a tourist destination for many years of its initial operations. It is a style of institution that is rarely seen today.

Historical Interest

The building itself was a marvel of its time and very much an interesting contribution to the beautiful and flawed system of mental health reform. In a time when the mentally ill were sometimes sent to prison, Greystone is a historic reminder that a patient doesn't choose to be mentally ill and that, in Kirkbride's words, "there is no reason why an individual who has the misfortune to become insane, should, on that account, be deprived of any comfort or luxury" (Tagliareni and Mathews, *Greystone* 12). Greystone also had a few famous patients, including Woodie Guthrie.

Architecture

Kirkbride architecture is a design of the past, and Greystone was one of the few remaining Kirkbride buildings which remain standing making it a very intriguing site for any architecture enthusiast. The Second Empire architecture, which was popular during the Victorian Era, quickly fell out of vogue in the 1880s making this type of architecture virtually unseen in modern construction today.

Since the administration building was not vacated until 2008, much of the splendor of the main building was still intact even in abandonment. The loss of such a structure is not one that can be recuperated. Not only is the skill in such a construction no longer readily available, but the cost of such elaborate architecture would likely exceed most modern budgets. However, the demolition of Greystone was covered by a

"$34.4 million bond" that was issued by the state (Tagliareni and Mathews, *Greystone* 107). The taxpayers of New Jersey inevitably paid for the creation of an empty field despite many bids to buy and refurbish the structure by outside contractors. The inevitable cost of demolition was the loss of iconic architecture of one of the most influential institutions of its time.

Artistic Aesthetics

The slow deterioration of the asylum has been documented by many photographers. Asylums alone are a major export of Urbex photographers, especially when many institutions had closed their doors and left much of the old furnishings and paperwork inside, making an interesting setting for photography of the modern decay.

Science of Fear

The originally airy wings with rows of windows were widely broken during the buildings time as a ruin, leaving curtains and shades askew. Many windows on the lower floors were boarded, leading to the ominous feeling of capture rather than rehabilitation. The ash colored, gneiss stones used in the buildings construction only added to its grim and foreboding stance on the barren hilltop once left to ruin. The roof of many wings had collapsed in on themselves adding to the austere and broken aesthetic. Even Tagliareni and Mathews on their visit to photograph Greystone in its state of decay recognized the sheer terror incurred upon entering. They found some of the collapsed structure still had electricity and found that "florescent bulbs flickered in crooked housings in a way that even Hollywood horror films have yet to get right" (Tagliareni and Mathews, *Antiquity* 69). Besides decay, the everlasting reminder of death, Greystone was for many a reminder of the terrible tragedies which occurred during the mistreatment of the patients

inside. These tragedies were offered as probable cause by many advocating the demolition of the structure. Perhaps it is true, as Baldwin said, that people sense that once "hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with the pain" (597).

Tragedy Paradox/Morbid Curiosity

One man's tragedy becomes another man's curiosity, and this was likely the case with Greystone. As a ruin, the halls of Greystone appeared to promise the terrible stories of the patients locked within its walls. I have spoken with a few people who had broken into Greystone before its demolition, and in both accounts these trespassers remarked on finding the files of patients scattered among the ruins. What is more morbid than the voyeuristic act of finding the confidential medical files of a former patient?

Paranormal Superstitions

I had no doubt when I first drove up the main drive to Greystone that it was haunted, and yet I did not believe in ghosts. I was forming an opinion about Greystone because of what I knew about the institution as well as what I thought I knew from popular culture. It is easy to believe a place like Greystone could be haunted. These "places are often haunted, but not by anything paranormal, rather by our own failings and how we as a society choose to cope with them. Abandoned places are like mirrors, and how we perceive them is primarily based upon how we perceive ourselves" Tagliareni stated when asked about the ghosts of ruins (Personal interview, 18 Nov. 2018). Now demolished, the only ghost left is the memory of what once had been. In an installment of a volume of Weird NJ the writers put it succinctly of Greystone that "in the end, whether all these stories of ghosts, demons, and mythical beasts are true or not doesn't really matter. All that really matters is that the stories of them are still alive and being

told and retold" (Sceurman and Moran 267). In the end, a true haunting is less important than the intimate connection sites like Greystone evoke within us.

The ruin of Greystone has been demolished, but that is not a closure in dialogue about the importance of Preserve Greystone's efforts to save the structure. Greystone's obvious similarities to a site such as Eastern State Penitentiary nearly make the argument for its potential as a sustainable preservation site unnecessary. But since the demolition of Greystone was essentially completed on November 12, 2015 despite public protest, it is apparent that the model for preservation needs something greater than a format that strongly resembles the success of the site as a ruin.

The loss of such a historic site is arguably a tragedy, especially when full facts of the demolition are brought to light. Greystone was public property because it was owned by the state and "its demolition was paid for with public funding, yet there was never a public forum in which the citizenry of the state could discuss the matter" noted Tagliareni, concluding that "broken government demolished Greystone" (Personal interview, 3 Dec. 2018). This reckons back to the inevitable fact that public support was needed to save Eastern State, but it also speaks to the fact that the government which inevitably controls the fate of the site needs to be on board with preservation too.

Once a stable model for preservation is presented through the ruin's success as a ruin and by using these Ruin Lust Attractors to model its preservation, how do preservationists garner the support of the government? Many preservationists realize the truth that "the poetics of ruin must have room for the politics of ruin" (Ginsberg 144). In a personal interview Christian J. VanAntwerpen, an advocate of Greystone and president

of PreservationWorks, stated "the time-line for demolition begins once the building is uninhabited" and "buildings need to be advocated for way before the politicians draw up demolition plans." These are some of the hard lessons which were learned after the fall of Greystone.

Greystone's most active advocates do not consider the efforts to save Greystone to have been a failure. Instead, they choose their words carefully and call Greystone's demise the "fall of Greystone" rather than the failure at Greystone. Once the structure of Greystone was demolished, it would seem likely that the group Preserve Greystone would cease to have a purpose. Instead, leaders of the group, along with other preservationists combined their experience to understand the story of Greystone's demolition was a "cautionary tale" (VanAntwerpen qtd. In Tagliagreni and Mathews, *Greystone* 116). At a conference held at Traverse City in Michigan at another, fully revitalized and re-purposed Kirkbride asylum, the group PreservationWorks was founded, taking on the 501(c)3 status originally held by the Preserve Greystone group.

The Traverse City State Hospital was arguably in a worse state of ruin before it was rehabilitated, and yet it stands today as a monument to the success of preservation efforts. Therefore, the mission of the PreservationWorks group, guided by founder and president VanAntwerpen, is to be an advocacy group for Kirkbride structures, utilizing knowledge gleaned from the success of Traverse City and the loss of Greystone as a guide for future preservation. Greystone is a case study of a fall, but in many ways it was also a success. It is not easy to be the cautionary tale, but Greystone serves as a turning point not only for preservation of Kirkbride structures, but in arousing public support of historic preservation and education as a whole.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Leaving the Ruin

Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains.
—Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandias*

Enter the ruin from the periphery of our subconscious to the forefront of our minds' eye. During this short journey through the culture of abandoned places, it has become clear that ruin lust transcends age limits and calls the human gaze from many different walks of life. The call to ruin sounds different to everyone. But after entering the ruin, we must eventually leave it whether we leave by closing a book or by stepping carefully off broken boards and back onto solid earth. We would believe that our life cannot be lived in ruin. We must take only memories and leave only footprints behind, understanding that knowledge is the last true souvenir of ruin, that is, the tactile knowledge of our world and reflexively a better knowledge of ourselves. Through understanding these theoretical Ruin Lust Attractors, a better understanding of ruin attraction can be understood.

These foundation theories include: Simple Curiosity, Historical Interest, Imagination and Nostalgia for the Past, Architectural Motivation, Artistic Aesthetic, a Return to Nature, the Contemplation of Self, the enticement of Fun Fear, the strangeness of Morbid Curiosity, and finally the promise of the Paranormal. With a better understanding of the allure of decay and destruction, the call to ruin can become less obscure and taboo. These points of attraction, not always learned, can be hardwired into the neural circuitry of the human brain which would suggest that along with our many other evolutions, humans have evolved to accept and even enjoy ruin. Although actual Urban Exploration may be a niche culture, the ability to participate in

electronic voyeurism and to regard ruins through other mediums such as literature, film, and video games is what allows ruin lust to permeate to the very core of our daily lives.

On the small scale, having a better understanding of modern ruin can help to generate greater respect for ruin among ruin goers. While defacement of ruin appears often in some of the more out of the way places, it is desirable that ruin not be destroyed in the hope that it remains intact for future explorers. As Ginsberg stated, "people choose their ruins as an act of cultural identity" (147). I would go a step further, and say how we treat a ruin is reflexive of how we regard and respect ourselves. If this concept was more widely embraced, I believe quiet reflection would be more common at negative historical sites, and the amount of graffiti and defacement overall could decrease. Graffiti, while it can be a beautiful art, does not belong on the skulls of the dead in the catacombs of France where I have found it nor along the walls of institutions which were some of the worst instances of human suffering took place. In respecting the dead, and even in respecting the dying ruin, we garner more respect for ourselves.

On a larger scale, armed with a better foundational theory behind ruin attraction, preservationists can use this knowledge to create a better and sustainable model for the preservation of ruins. The traits that made these abandoned places of interest as a ruin can be used to create a successful site of preservation. A sustainable model of preservation is the first step to acquiring support from both public and government figures. Preservation is one of the truest ways to respect our desire to enter the ruin, creating structures that will outlast ourselves. We have entered the ruin, and the ruin has entered us, and so we cannot really ever leave ruin.

I was beginning to realize I could not escape ruin after the years of research I conducted for this study. One day, I was driving back roads through rolling hills and open fields, and for the first time I did not look for ruin. I had been for months marching through the woods to broken doorways, driving down winding roads to decay, stepping on crumbling stairs looking for an answer to a question I hadn't fully formed yet in my mind. I had begun to see ruin in everything: in books I had picked for pleasure, in poems I read in passing, in any movie I found the time to watch. I found it even in the pages of my unfinished writing, in the dreams I had harbored for the future, in loves I had once cultivated, in the proximity of death after my grandmother passed away, and in the abandoned streets of a ruined world wracked by pandemic. Suddenly, I found myself completely overwhelmed and inundated by ruin. I was sickened by abandonment.

I drove until I came to the skeletal structure of the old, run-down barn and stopped. It was not a ruin but a home. I tacked up my old, but regal mare with her ruinous eyesight, ever present worry at her age dogging the back of my mind. Always, I was wondering which ride would be our last. I took her out onto the trails trying to think of anything but ruin. Near the end of our ride, we turned onto an open stretch of field. I knew she wanted to take off on me a few seconds before she even moved, I could even feel her thinking it. I adjusted the reins in my hands, sat deeper in the seat of the saddle, thinking back: *Run.* And she ran. She moved

Figure 33: Eleanor At Home

with the same grace she had ten years before, strong bay legs stretching out on the soft spring ground and then, caught in the wind of our race, I was not bothered by ruin anymore. Not the ones that I could see or even the ones buried so deeply down inside myself they were always painful to excavate. We may not always want ruin, but the ruins find us anyway, and if we give them a voice, all that we have abandoned in life will never truly be lost. The foundations of all life were built on ruin. Now, knowing them, these ruins, I recognized what a strong foundation that is. Ruins are our past, present, and future. They are our failed endeavors, forgotten institutions, and undesirable mistakes. They are things we once cultivated and then had to release. They are our dead. They are ruinous but not hopeless. My old horse and I chased down the wind that day, and I accepted that ruin was always going to be a part of my life, and that I was ready, again, to embrace it with a free and wild abandon.

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